9-2002

From Their Lives: A Manual on How to Conduct Focus Groups of Low-Income Parents

Helen Ward
University of Southern Maine, hward@usm.maine.edu

Julie Atkins
University of Southern Maine, jatkins@usm.maine.edu

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Helen Ward, Project Director

Julie Atkins, Research Assistant

A publication of the Institute for Child and Family Policy of the
Edmund S. Muskie School of Public Service, University of Southern Maine,
and funded by the Ford Foundation, September, 2002.

ISBN 0-9708327-2-9

September 2002

Acknowledgements

We wish to express our thanks to the Ford Foundation for their funding of this manual and to Nancy Sconyers who supplied the inspiration and support for this work.

We would also like to thank the Ford Foundation for their support of the focus groups we did in Virginia, and the Child Care Bureau of the Administration on Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, for their support of the focus groups we conducted in Connecticut and Maine.

Our appreciation goes to Ami Nagle, Erin Oldham, Amy Rossi and Nancy Sconyers for reviewing drafts of the manual and providing us with their comments.

We are grateful to the many collaborators we had for our focus group projects, at both the state and community level. Their wisdom and advice were invaluable to us as we carried out the focus groups and kept track of "lessons learned" for inclusion in this manual.

A particular thanks to Suzanne Clark Johnson, Executive Director of the Action Alliance for Virginia's Children and Youth, the statewide child advocacy organization with whom we collaborated on our initial focus group project in that state, and to Linda Rich, our focus group facilitator for the focus groups we held in all three states. In the various "debriefings" we held, their insights contributed significantly to the development of this "how to" guide.

Most of all, we wish to express our gratitude to the parents who participated in our focus groups. So much of what we learned was a result of their willingness to allow us into their lives.

Contents

PART II: PUTTING THE PLAN INTO ACTION

Introduction

Focus groups date back to the 1920s. They have been used primarily to test marketing strategies for products and as a tool for politicians to weigh public opinion on a given issue. More and more, however, social policy researchers are using focus groups to learn in depth about the impact of programs, often as a first step in a broader research effort.

This “how to” manual is designed for organizations that advocate for the needs of low-income families and children. It describes how focus groups of parents can be used as an effective research method by multi-issue or single-issue advocacy organizations to address such concerns as affordable housing, health care, child care, or nutrition.

Focus groups can:

- enable advocacy groups to fashion an agenda that accurately reflects the concerns of the population they seek to represent;
- act as a springboard for advocates to engage more parents in their work;
- increase the credibility of advocates by bringing parents’ voices into the policy debate;
- provide personal stories to supplement data in order to influence policy makers effectively; and
- inform the design of further research on a given topic.

This manual provides an overview of focus group methodology. It also discusses particular issues involved in conducting focus groups of low-income parents. The information is based on recent experience conducting parent focus groups in three states: Connecticut, Maine and Virginia (where we collaborated with the Action Alliance for Virginia’s Children and Youth, a statewide child advocacy organization). Some of these focus groups involved low-income parents in general and addressed child care and child health insurance issues. Others were with low-income parents of children with special needs and focused on access to child care and balancing work and family. We hope the manual will be useful, regardless of the subject matter of your inquiry.

In writing this manual we tried to prepare readers for any contingency which might arise as they progress from the initial planning stage to the final tasks of analyzing data and writing reports. Accordingly we include a great deal of detail so you can use the manual as a step-by-step reference. We designed the manual so that you can insert it into a three-ring binder that can also accommodate other written materials specific to your project.

Chapters are organized in the order of the tasks that need to be completed and include examples drawn from the focus group projects we recently conducted. In addition, appendices present sample focus group tools and checklists.

Lastly, a note of caution. By their nature, focus group projects are unpredictable, and your approach will vary from what we describe depending on the population you are studying, the subject matter of your inquiry, and the resources you have available. You may choose not to follow the exact steps we outline, or you may need to complete additional tasks. There may be times, however, when you will be tempted to cut corners in order to speed up the research or save on resources. Resist that temptation if doing so will compromise the soundness of your methodology and expose your findings to criticism. If you apply the basic principles of proper focus group methodology (described in the next chapter) to all your decisions, the credibility of your results will not be undermined.

1 Focus Group Basics

What is a focus group?

"Imagine a group discussion among strangers which resembles a lively conversation among friends. It is led by a facilitator, and held in a comfortable location within the community, such as a school, hospital or community center. The number of people in the group ranges from six to twelve; the meeting's length is around two hours." *

A focus group is a research method designed to explore a particular topic (e.g., access to child care) by gathering the experiences and perceptions of selected target populations (e.g., working parents). This chapter outlines the basic principles of proper focus group methodology. It also discusses the advantages and limitations of focus groups as a research tool. Finally, the chapter lists some special considerations to keep in mind when conducting focus groups of low-income parents.

What are the key principles of focus group methodology?

When advocates conduct research, there is always a risk that policy makers will doubt the validity of the findings. Was the research conducted objectively, or did the organization's own agenda drive the gathering and analysis of the information in order to promote a particular point of view? Recognizing this risk, we emphasize throughout the text the critical importance of following proper focus group methodology. Adhering to the principles listed below will help insure that the findings accurately reflect parents' concerns and that the research is found credible by policy makers.

- **Objectivity.** Researchers involved in designing and conducting the focus groups and analyzing the findings must remain neutral. When recruiting participants, compose and ask questions in an objective way to avoid the impression that there is a particular message you want to hear. In analyzing results, take care not to exaggerate the sentiments expressed, leave out important themes, report comments out of context, or come to premature conclusions in order to support a particular agenda or point of view.
- **Diversity of experience.** Design strategies for recruiting focus group participants to maximize the diversity of experiences represented. While the findings of focus groups cannot be generalized to any larger population, it is still important to seek a variety of demographic characteristics and family circumstances within your target population so you will have a full range of experiences represented in your focus group discussions.

* Susan Webster, *Focus Groups: An Effective Marketing Research Tool for Social Service Agencies.* Project Maine Families, National Child Welfare Resource Center for Management and Administration, Institute for Child and Family Policy, Edmund S. Muskie School of Public Service, University of Southern Maine, 1992.

- **Consistency.** In order to analyze results across focus group sessions, researchers must be consistent throughout the process. Variations in the script used to explain the project to potential participants, the way in which parents are screened, or the questions asked during the focus group sessions will impair your ability to accurately identify themes and arrive at conclusions.
- **Ethical obligations.** Researchers have certain ethical obligations to participants to safeguard confidentiality and to insure that participation is voluntary so that participants can give their informed consent.

References to these basic principles will appear in various contexts throughout the text of this manual.

What are the advantages of focus groups?

As a research tool, focus groups offer the following advantages:

- **Fast results.** Focus groups produce results relatively quickly. If recruitment strategies are successful, a series of discussions can be conducted in a fairly short period of time.
- **Participant comfort.** Focus groups allow researchers to collect data while a group is interacting; most people welcome the opportunity to talk with others about an issue they care about.
- **Flexibility.** Unlike surveys and more structured research methods, focus groups offer researchers the flexibility to listen and then probe deeper on a particular point if they desire.
- **Real-life examples.** Results are easier to understand for lay people than the statistical findings of quantitative research. Overall conclusions can be illustrated with quotes and vignettes from the focus group participants. Provided with such accounts of real-life experiences, policy makers are better able to see the impact of their decisions on the everyday lives of families.
- **Useful initial step.** The focus group method can be used alone, as long as its limitations are fully understood. (See below for an explanation of these limitations.) However, the method can also be an important first step in a larger inquiry. Focus groups can help researchers refine their research questions and decide what questions to include in surveys and polls.

What are the disadvantages?

Keep in mind the following limitations of focus group research:

- **Results cannot be generalized.** Because focus group participants do not represent a big enough sample size, the information gathered cannot be used to make statements about any larger population. Thus you are restricted in what you are able to say about the significance of the findings.
- **Difficult recruitment.** Locating participants can be a time-consuming process. Recruiting in low-income neighborhoods can be particularly difficult because of the reasons detailed below in the section on special considerations of doing focus groups of low-income parents.
- **Loss of objectivity.** Data are sometimes difficult to analyze because of a temptation, conscious or unconscious, to overstate a finding or pick and choose among participants' statements to satisfy your own agenda.

CAUTION

It's easy to become so impressed with the findings from your focus groups that you're tempted to overstate their significance. Resist that temptation! Always keep in mind that what you learn from focus group participants cannot be generalized to any larger population. For example, if most parents *in the focus groups* say they prefer center-based child care, you cannot conclude that most *low-income parents* prefer center-based care. You cannot even say most low-income parents *in that town or city* prefer center-based care. What you can say is that most participants *in your focus groups* expressed a preference for center-based care.

What are the special issues of low-income parent focus groups?

Special considerations need to be kept in mind when your target population is low-income parents. These issues apply to all parents to some degree but are more likely to affect those with low incomes. They will be discussed in greater detail later under appropriate sections of the manual.

- **Trust.** Low-income parents may feel wary unless they trust the organization coordinating or sponsoring the focus groups. They may be concerned about whether the information they give will be shared with officials in the "system." Engendering trust should drive decisions about sponsorship of the project, how materials are written, recruitment, confidentiality assurances, and the manner in which parents are accommodated during the sessions.
- **Scheduling.** Compared to families with higher incomes, low-income parents may tend to have nontraditional and/or inflexible work hours; scheduling needs to accommodate that reality.
- **Language barriers.** For parents with language barriers, project staff must decide whether to use a facilitator who speaks the language of the participants or to provide a translator at the session. Written materials need to be translated so that participants can understand them.
- **Education levels.** Varying levels of education among low-income parents must be considered when creating forms and designing the protocol that will be used in focus group sessions.

- **Site selection.** If possible, choose a neutral site that is comfortable and familiar to participants; it should be accessible to public transportation.
- **Incentives and supports.** Depending on the site location, you may need to arrange for transportation to insure attendance. Child care should be provided. The most effective incentive is to pay participants a stipend. While it is important to demonstrate that you value the time of any focus group participant, providing a cash stipend is a significant gesture for low-income parents who may have gone to considerable lengths to attend the session. Stipends will increase the number of parents who respond to recruitment materials, helping to create a pool large enough to include the mix of parents you desire.

2 Your Management Plan

Now that you are grounded in the basics of focus group methodology, you are ready to begin planning your project. Right away, you will need to make major decisions about how your project will be structured. This chapter will discuss staffing needs and options, the partnership role that community groups can play, and how to develop a timeline and budget.

Where do you look for research expertise?

Unless you happen to have qualified researchers on staff, you will want help planning and executing your project. You may decide to partner with a university or research firm, or you may hire a research consultant, particularly for the initial phases of your inquiry. You should also consider the advantages of putting together an advisory committee.

In deciding whether to collaborate with a university or research firm, consider these advantages and disadvantages.

Advantages:

- **Objectivity.** Universities or research firms can lend impartiality to the study, which may strengthen your findings in the eyes of policy makers.
- **Expertise and resources.** Researchers are trained to adhere to proper focus group methodology and fashion questions to best get at what you want to learn. They also may have the means to analyze the findings more efficiently.
- **Experience.** If you choose researchers who are experienced in recruiting from the low-income population and who have worked in the policy areas you want to examine, you may benefit from that experience in developing research questions and focus group protocol, adopting effective recruitment strategies and analyzing findings.

Disadvantages:

- **Expense.** Using a university or research firm is likely to add to your costs and may lengthen your timeline for completing the project.
- **Management complexity.** Collaboration requires careful monitoring of the work of the researchers throughout the process. Good communication and a clear understanding of respective roles and responsibilities are essential.
- **Lack of awareness.** Unless the research entity has had significant experience conducting focus groups of low-income parents, they may not be aware of the special issues to consider during all phases of the project.

- **Lack of community relationships.** For successful recruitment, your organization may have to permit the researchers access to the community groups with which you have relationships. Such access will need to be facilitated by your staff.
- **Learning curve.** You and your staff may know more about the programs and policies being examined, and may be more adept at translating research findings for policy makers, than the researchers are. It will take time to provide this background and to review and edit drafts of the focus group instruments and report.
- **Lack of in-state resources.** In smaller states, appropriate research entities may not exist. You may need to go out of state to bring in researchers and this is likely to add to your costs and require greater coordination on your part.

What about a consultant?

A possible compromise between contracting with a university or research firm and going it alone may be to hire a research consultant to work in an advisory capacity, assisting in the planning and reviewing of instruments, being available for questions, and reviewing the draft of the report on the findings. This middle course may save you money and simplify the partnership, but it may also sacrifice the public perception of impartiality that a university or research firm can offer. Ultimately, it's up to your organization to decide what will work best for your particular project.

Do you need an advisory committee?

Although creating and staffing a committee requires time and energy, it may be helpful to include an advisory group of some kind as part of your team. Members might include: experts in each of the policy arenas related to your research, policy makers in a position to follow up on your findings to bring about needed reforms, low-income parents, and representatives from community-based organizations in the areas where you plan to conduct your research.

Perhaps there is a group your organization already works with that could fill this advisory role. You should plan on asking the committee for assistance and advice on such tasks as: gathering state- and community-specific information on the target population and the programs and policies that affect them, developing research questions and recruitment strategies, interpreting findings and understanding their policy implications, and planning for, and assisting in, the dissemination of the findings.

The participation of an advisory committee is likely to enhance the political credibility of your research when results are released. Members can be effective spokespersons to present findings to the media and policy makers.

Staffing: whom do you need on your team?

To carry out your project, you may end up using a mix of in-house personnel, individuals hired for the project, and staff from community groups who are partners in the research. You will need to assign staff to the following functions:

- **Project director.** Someone with research experience needs to manage the project and insure that correct focus group methodology is followed. Often this person also takes the lead on analyzing the findings and writing the final report.
- **Facilitator.** The focus group moderator keeps the conversation going, makes participants feel comfortable, and helps them stay focused. This person should be a skilled, experienced facilitator. We strongly recommend that the person be hired from outside your organization to avoid the risk that he or she may bias the discussion, consciously or unconsciously, to fit the agenda of your organization.
- **Note taker.** The note taker attends the focus group, takes detailed notes, and may operate the tape recorder.
- **Observer.** The observer watches participants for nonverbal cues, providing additional eyes and ears for the facilitator, and operates the tape recorder if that job is not assigned to the note taker.
- **Logistical coordinator.** The logistical coordinator oversees site selection, screening, and recruitment; acts as the main contact for community groups; arranges for refreshments and child care; makes sure that the room is appropriately arranged; provides a list of expected attendees to the facilitator and the note taker; and handles all other last minute details. If you're short on staff, the logistical coordinator can serve as the observer or note taker during the session. It is essential to pick a well-organized but easy-going person for this job—it can be incredibly hectic!
- **Screeners.** Screeners field phone calls from parents responding to your recruitment materials, following a protocol to determine whether parents meet the criteria for participation that you have set. (See Chapter Six for a discussion of recruitment and screening.)

TIP

The author of the report on your findings will want to be present at least at a few of the sessions in order to understand the process and get a feel for the participants. It may save money and time for that person to attend only a few sessions and then listen to tapes of the rest of the sessions, or for that person to also serve as the focus group observer.

TIP

If possible, have the same facilitator at each focus group to insure consistency.

TIP

Remember that if you are planning to conduct focus groups of parents for whom English is not a first language, you will need facilitators, observers, note takers, and screeners who are fluent in the parents' first language.

What role can community groups play?

Community groups are central to your project because of their invaluable local knowledge. Once you have chosen the communities in which you plan to conduct sessions, the expertise of local groups can be tapped for everything from site selection and available populations for recruitment to such details as refreshments, transportation, and child care. The degree of their potential involvement will depend on their willingness to help and the staff they have available. You may choose to ask them simply to allow their name to be used on your flyers as a co-sponsor. Or you may want their active assistance in finding and screening parents. A local, well-known, and trusted organization can encourage interest, attendance, and a feeling of comfort on the part of the participants. New relationships between organizations may be formed, or existing ones strengthened, through the process.

How do you choose such partners?

Depending on the contacts your organization has in the community where you plan to hold focus groups, this question may answer itself. A group with whom you already have a working relationship may be the obvious choice. If not, here are a few things to look for in choosing a community group to approach:

- Find an agency or organization that works directly with the population you have targeted for your research at the local level.
- Explore with other contacts whether this group is respected and trusted in the community.
- Gauge the degree to which the group will be able to help you by the enthusiasm with which your project is received. A group that sees an effort like yours as fitting their mission and serving the needs of the population they serve will be motivated to give you the commitment you need.
- Unless you have an unusually ample timeframe for your research, avoid choosing groups that are part of a much larger bureaucracy. This can slow decision-making within their organization. (See Field Note.)

Field Note

One of the groups we approached in our special needs project was affiliated with a hospital. The group was very willing to help us, but we had to go through a series of bureaucratic hoops to get the hospital to sign off on an agreement to co-sponsor the project. Progress came to a standstill for weeks while we awaited a final decision.

What support do community groups need from you?

Community groups require oversight, direction, and a sense of connection to the project. At your first meeting, have prepared a written project description, answers to frequently asked questions, and a list of possible roles they could play. (See Appendix C for the one-page fact sheet we distributed in our special needs project.) If they have this information in writing from the start, they will understand the scope of the project and be better able to determine if they have the staff time available to provide you with the assistance you need.

Recognize that staff at likely agencies and organizations are often over-extended. Make it clear from the beginning that you will do everything possible to make it easy for them to become involved. If you want them to send a letter to their clients endorsing your project, offer to write the letter for them, make copies, stuff the envelopes and, of course, pay for postage. If they have a staff meeting scheduled, offer to come and talk about your project and answer any questions they might have.

The logistical coordinator should be the primary liaison between the project and the community group staff. She or he should meet with the community groups, visit suggested sites for the focus groups, and, if staff from the community group are going to screen the parents, arrange for them to be trained. The logistical coordinator should be responsible for communicating the project staff's needs and decisions to the community groups so they can understand what the target population is, the criteria for site selection, and what recruitment strategies are acceptable.

How do you develop a timeline for your project?

Your overall timeline will depend on the number of communities you choose, the geographic distances between them, and the total number of focus groups you conduct. (See Appendix A for a sample timeline.)

Consider the following factors in developing a timeline:

- **Planning.** Allow time initially for planning the project, including making decisions about the criteria you will use to define your population, developing your research questions, and creating your focus group instruments such as the screening tool and protocol. Taking the time to conduct a pilot focus group will help refine your questions and written materials. (See Chapter Four for a discussion of focus group instruments and Chapter Seven for a discussion of pilot focus groups.)
- **Finding participants.** Allow what you think will be enough time to recruit parents and then double your estimate! Recruitment can be a long, unpredictable process. If you're not liberal with your estimate in the beginning, unanticipated snags in the recruitment process can wreak havoc with your timeline later on.
- **Travel.** Include travel time, if necessary, for your facilitator and/or staff.
- **Transcribing, translating.** Provide adequate time for the audio tapes of the sessions to be transcribed and for any translations that are necessary to be completed. This is difficult, detail-oriented work. The transcription/translation process should begin as soon as your first focus group is held. Don't wait until all of your sessions are completed.

- **Report preparation.** Allow sufficient time for analyzing the transcripts, identifying themes, choosing quotes, and drafting and editing the final report. The credibility of your results depends on the care and attention to detail you bring to this task.
- **Final steps.** Remember to include time for designing, printing, and disseminating the final report.

How much will this project cost?

Costs will depend on such factors as the number of communities in which you plan to conduct focus groups, the total number of sessions to be held in each, the number of subpopulations targeted, whether you contract with an outside research entity, and the potential for obtaining in-kind donations—space for the sessions, volunteers to provide child care—for some of your project expenses. When constructing a project budget, you will need to consider costs for the following elements:

- consultant fees, and conference calls and face-to-face meetings between partners, if you are collaborating with outside researchers (see Field Note.) ;
- focus group facilitator's fees;
- travel (mileage or airfare and lodging if necessary, for facilitator, logistical coordinator, note taker, observer, and any other staff members);
- audio equipment, tapes, and a high quality microphone for recording sessions;
- cash stipends for participants;
- refreshments;
- child care and transportation for focus group participants and their children;
- transcription services or transcribing equipment if you plan to do the task in-house (A tape recorder with a foot pedal will range in cost from about $300 to $500 and can be found in any office supply catalogue.) ;
- translation services if you are conducting sessions in a language other than English (Consider the services needed to prepare focus group materials and screen the parents; for facilitating, note-taking, and observing at the sessions; and for translating the transcripts.);
- focus group facilities (if not donated);
- financial contribution or gift of an item needed by the community groups you work with as a thank you, if you consider that appropriate;
- copying or printing services for recruitment and focus group materials, printing and design services for the report, and postage and other dissemination costs; and
- staff time.

Field Note

To manage each of our projects we found it helpful to schedule weekly or bi-weekly meetings or conference calls throughout the planning and implementation phases. These were the responsibility of our project director and were used to review progress on tasks, answer any questions, and make decisions as unexpected issues came up. The project director also met regularly with the logistical coordinator. We found that supplementing conference calls by bringing together outside researchers and in-house staff for at least two face-to-face meetings during the planning and implementation phases was well worth the time and expense. These meetings strengthened relationships between the groups and helped us accomplish more in the long run.

3 Planning Your Research

Your staff is in place, you have contracted with research collaborators or consultants, and you have thought about what kind of community groups you might contact as potential partners. You have also made decisions about your timeline and budget. Now you are ready, as a team, to plan your research.

This chapter will provide guidance on the major decisions your team needs to make in developing your research plan: most importantly, the development of your overall research questions and the identification of the specific populations from which to recruit parents for the focus groups. It will also describe a process for collecting information about the operation of the programs and policies affecting low-income parents which are relevant to the subject of your inquiry.

How do you start?

Before any work can be done on your research plan, your team needs to:

- **Establish the goals of the project.** What are you trying to accomplish by doing this research?
- **Identify the target audience for your research.** Identifying whom you are trying to reach with your findings will influence such central aspects of the project as the research questions themselves, the target populations to recruit, and the location of the focus groups. It will also determine the format of your final report and the strategies you develop to disseminate it.
- **Review the basic principles of focus group methodology** so that all staff understand them and appreciate their importance to the credibility of the research.

With that as a foundation, the team then can turn their attention to developing the project's research questions, identifying the population from which participants will be recruited and selecting the locations of the focus group sessions.

What do you want to learn?

Your team will need to determine exactly what you want to learn through the focus groups so you can develop the research questions for your project. These overall questions are not to be confused with the actual questions put to participants during the focus group sessions. Research questions ask in broad terms what you want to learn about the participants' experiences, perceptions, and opinions on a given topic. These questions must be closely linked to the goals of your project. Their development should take into consideration the needs of the target audience for your research.

Research questions are critical because they form the basis for so many aspects of the project: the identification of the population to be included in the focus groups, the communities in which the focus groups will be held, the content of the recruiting and screening instruments, and the development of the focus group protocol used by the facilitator during the sessions.

When developing your research questions, keep in mind the length of time you're allowing for each session. It's a good idea to limit your scope to no more than four or five research questions addressing one or two theme areas such as child care, health care or nutrition. Don't be overly ambitious about what you can reasonably cover in the time allotted. Focusing on fewer research questions allows you to produce the kind of rich information focus groups can offer. (See Field Note.)

If you still have worries about the scope of your inquiry, you will have a chance to test whether you can cover the issues in the time allotted when you conduct your pilot session (See Chapter Seven for discussion about conducting a pilot.) It will be evident if you have been overly ambitious, and you can narrow your inquiry by eliminating or altering some of your questions.

Once you have settled on your research questions, you can then use them to write a protocol or script that probes for answers from participants. The development of the protocol (described in Chapter Four) can be time consuming and should begin as soon as possible.

Field Note

In our project on child care and child health insurance, we planned on sessions of no longer than one and a half hours. While child care was our primary focus, we initially planned on also asking parents about their experiences obtaining health insurance for their children and about their attempts to access health care services once they had insurance. Even before we conducted the pilot focus group, we realized we wouldn't have time to deal adequately with all of these topic areas. We kept our focus on child care but limited our inquiry regarding child health care to the experiences of parents in obtaining health insurance for their children — that is, questions about outreach, eligibility, and enrollment.

What are the target populations of your study?

Use your newly developed research questions to help define the population you want to study and the groups within that broader population to invite to the sessions. Is your broader population families receiving housing subsidies? Is it families making less than $20,000 per year with at least one child under age five? Is it families using child care subsidies?

In establishing your criteria for participation, be careful not to exclude or include any group without considering what you may be losing or gaining in doing so. Take time to make these decisions or you will regret them later when you analyze your results. (See Field Note.)

Field Note

In our project on child care and child health insurance, our primary focus was the child care subsidy program. At our initial planning meeting, we decided to set our guidelines at 200% of the federal poverty level (FPL). Later, we did a closer examination of the income guidelines for child care assistance measured against the very high cost of living in one of the geographic areas we targeted. Local experts told us about the challenges of families who didn't qualify, so we decided to change our criteria for participation to 225% of FPL in order to include more families in these circumstances. For them, the task of finding affordable child care may be especially difficult and their choice of care severely limited. If we had excluded them we would have missed gaining insight into the question of whether the guidelines for child care assistance are realistic.

Another focus of our project was to explore issues of the working poor. Initially, we considered requiring that participants be working at least part-time. However, we realized that we would then miss the experiences of parents who might work if they were able to find affordable, reliable child care. By dropping the requirement and including both parents who worked outside the home and those who stayed at home with their children, we were able to determine whether the stay-at-home parents did so by choice or because they were unable to afford child care. As it turned out, we discovered that the great majority of these parents—both those who were single parents and those who had working spouses—said they would go to school or become employed if they could get child care assistance. We were able to uncover another piece of important information for policy makers assessing the adequacy of the child care assistance available to low-income families.

In the end, we arrived at the following simple criteria for participation:

- Parent or guardian of at least one child age 5 or under
- Income at or below 225% FPL

How do you attract participants with a mix of experiences?

Once you have established the criteria for your broader study population, use your research questions to consider the mix of experiences within that population that you would like to see represented at the focus group sessions. Do you want to be able to compare single parent families with two parent families? Low-income families receiving housing subsidies to those without that assistance? Parents who work outside the home to parents who stay at home with their children?

These judgments will guide subsequent decisions (discussed later in this manual) regarding what your recruitment strategies will be, what screening questions you will ask, and how you will select and group participants.

Among many considerations in identifying these subpopulations, there are two that come up most frequently in planning the make-up of focus groups: geographic diversity and racial and ethnic diversity.

Geographic Diversity. Decisions on the location of your focus groups will be based largely on the experiences you want to capture. Examine the demographics and economic base of the different geographic areas of your state or community and look at your research questions in light of those factors. Consider where the subpopulations that interest you are more likely to be found. There also may be differences in how statewide programs are administered from county to county or region to region, and you may want to learn what impact those differences have on families. (See Field Note.)

Once you have thought of all the potential areas that might serve your purposes, you might narrow your choices based on other considerations. There may be an area of the state that has not received adequate attention from policy makers. Perhaps there are key state legislators you want to educate; conducting focus groups in their districts might be a way of attracting their attention. Such strategic factors are valid to consider as long as the ultimate decisions you make support your overall methodology.

Field Note

In our project on child care and child health insurance, we were interested in how the experiences of low-income parents trying to find child care might differ based on geography. By including both urban and rural locations, we captured an important distinction: while parents in Northern Virginia worried most about child care *costs,* parents in the rural areas spoke about the lack of *any* formal child care programs for certain age groups.

Racial and Ethnic Diversity: Racial and ethnic groups, non-English speaking groups, immigrants, and other subpopulations may reflect differences in experiences you will want to explore. In some locations the choice of subpopulations is fairly straightforward. However, in areas where there is a highly diverse population of foreign and native-born residents, your choices may be more complex. The community groups you enlist to help you set up the sessions may be able to guide you in these decisions.

TIP

Refer to independently verifiable demographic data from the Census Bureau or your state's Kids Count data in determining which subgroups you should include and where they can be found.

The considerations of race/ethnicity and geographic diversity are interrelated. Depending on which factors are most important to your research questions, you may choose a geographic location because it is heavily populated with a particular ethnic group you want to recruit. Or, you may choose a geographic area to capture differences based on geography (urban versus rural) or programmatic policies, and then decide if there are specific ethnic or racial groups living there who should be recruited for your focus groups.

How do you learn about the operation of the programs that relate to your inquiry?

Unless you have adequate in-house expertise, it is helpful to schedule interviews with local experts on your chosen topics. You may have already recruited such experts for your advisory committee. The interviews should allow the team, particularly the facilitator, to understand both the theoretical and actual processes parents must go through to obtain and use services. Armed with such knowledge, the facilitator and research staff can grasp the significance of the stories parents tell without interrupting the narrative with questions about references to specific programs or agencies.

To understand how programs operate in theory and in practice, interview both state agency officials and legal services attorneys or other outside client advocates. Representatives of state agencies will know how programs are supposed to work. Those who represent the beneficiaries of these programs may give you better insight into how programs actually work.

Consider any biases these experts may have, however. State agency officials are less likely to identify flaws in the system while client advocates, who only see those beneficiaries who have encountered problems, may overstate the difficulties families face. Be sure to go into the focus group sessions with an open mind. Use the interviews to obtain information on issues that may or may not surface in the focus group discussions.

4 Focus Group Documents

Your overall research questions have been chosen, target populations and geographic locations selected, and background information gathered. Now you are ready to develop the documents that will govern the process of conducting the focus group sessions. This chapter will outline principles to keep in mind while working on these materials and discuss in detail what each document will include and accomplish.

What materials/instruments do you need to create?

You'll need to develop the following documents with which to recruit and screen parents and conduct the focus group sessions (Samples of each are included in the Appendices):

- **Project description:** Describes the purpose of the project, the subject of your inquiry and the way in which you will collect the information to insure consistency throughout your series of focus groups.
- **Recruitment materials:** Flyers and posters encouraging potential participants to call about attending a focus group session.
- **Screening form:** Script of basic questions to help the screener determine whether the caller fits the criteria for participating in the focus groups.
- **Registration form:** Filled out by participants before the focus group discussion to collect such detailed information as the ages of the children, income, and family size to be used later for analysis.
- **Protocol:** Introductory script and series of questions to be used by the facilitator during the focus group to describe the process, direct the conversation, and gather information from participants.
- **Consent forms:** A form promising confidentiality that is signed by participants.

TIP

The task of designing these materials in order to elicit the information you need in an unbiased way, and preserve confidentiality, takes a great deal of thought. Because the process usually takes much longer than you expect, you might want to estimate the time you will need and then double it! Have your facilitator, colleagues, and appropriate members of your advisory committee participate in developing, reviewing, and editing these documents.

TIP

Start developing these instruments as early as possible in your planning process, particularly if they need to be translated into a language other than English. You will need at least a working version of the project description very early on as you first begin to contact community groups.

What issues arise in composing focus group instruments?

Keep these general guidelines in mind when drafting all of your focus group materials:

- **Education level.** Use language simple enough to accommodate varying education levels among the parents in your target population.
- **Avoid unintended messages.** Do not use words that could bias the make-up of the group of parents who participate in your focus groups. For example, your recruitment and screening materials should say that you are interested in hearing about families' *experiences* with a given program. Such language conveys a neutrality that tends to attract parents with a mix of experiences and avoids suggesting that there is a specific viewpoint you want to hear. Never say that you are interested in hearing about the *problems* or *challenges* parents are having with that program.
- **Be sensitive.** If you are asking about income, provide parents with the opportunity to specify an income range—with a choice of weekly, monthly or annual figures—instead of asking them for a specific amount. Indicate whether you want the parent's income or the family's household income.
- **Allow self-identification.** Permit callers to identify their own race and ethnicity, if you are asking for that information, instead of forcing them to fit into a previously established list of ethnic and racial groups.

What will the specific instruments look like and accomplish?

Project description. This document describes the purpose of the project and the methodology you will employ. It is used to explain the project in a consistent way to all focus group participants so they will understand the nature of the study in which they will be involved. You can also adapt it for use with the community groups you hope to work with at the local level by adding a list of the questions you need them to help you answer, the ways in which you plan to recruit parents, and the functions they might serve—such as arranging child care, acting as screeners, or providing a site for the focus group sessions.

Recruitment materials. Depending on your recruitment strategy for attracting parents, you will need to produce posters and/or flyers for use in the community. Here are some suggestions for developing these materials:

- Involve the community groups you are working with in the design of your recruitment materials.
- Effective flyers are bright and eye-catching. Try not to include so much information that the flyers look busy; a casual viewer may miss the message.
- Briefly describe the topic of the focus group discussions. For example, "We Need Parents to Talk about Their Experiences in Looking for Child Care!"
- Include the amount of the stipend you plan to pay participants and the availability of child care, transportation, and refreshments to attract potential participants.

- To increase trust, include the name of the local community group who will be sponsoring the project with you.
- List the very basic criteria for participation (for example, at least one child aged 5 or under and a family income under $25,000 per year).
- Include a phone number that interested parents can call to find out if they meet the criteria for selection. Your community group can help you decide whether the population being targeted would be comfortable calling a toll-free number or whether using a local number would be more effective. (See Chapter Six for a fuller discussion of this issue.)
- Do not use language that suggests that parents will automatically be invited to participate if they call the number.
- Do not include the location of the session on the recruitment materials to avoid having unscreened or uninvited parents show up.
- Do include the anticipated length of the sessions and make it clear that you are asking parents to participate in only one of the sessions. You could say, "You may be invited to participate in one of a series of two hour discussion sessions . . ."

CAUTION

Attracting participants can take a long time, so don't delay developing recruitment materials until all issues are resolved. For example, if you haven't decided what phone number to use for follow-up and screening you can always add the number later before the flyers are copied and posted.

Screening tool. The screening instrument is used by staff responsible for talking to the parents who call after seeing the recruitment materials. The document has three main functions that flow directly from the decisions you have made about the target and subpopulations you want to reach:

- It provides for a consistent, **standardized script** so that all parents are presented with the same information. A script lessens the chance that staff will say something on their own that could bias the results of the focus group session.
- It lays out the **threshold criteria** for participation. (Is their income below $25,000 a year? Do they have a child aged 5 or under?) If the caller does not meet these criteria, he or she cannot participate.
- It includes questions about any **additional information** you need to select participants who represent a mix of circumstances and demographic factors (for example, on TANF, on TANF in past two years, never on TANF; or on Medicaid, privately insured, uninsured). If your research questions are fairly narrow, your threshold criteria may be all you need to make selections. In that case, you can confine your screening only to questions that get at that basic criteria. However, most research questions in focus groups involving this population are broader in scope. Soliciting information during screening on a variety of circumstances will offer the best basis from which to select participants and form your focus groups.

When developing the screening tool, keep in mind the following:

- Be sure to include an explanation of the purpose of the project and assurances of confidentiality, not only regarding what is said in the sessions but in relation to all information given in response to this or any other focus group instrument.
- The instrument should prompt screeners to ask the caller's permission before they begin asking questions. This gives callers the opportunity to opt out of the process if it makes them uncomfortable.
- Keep the screening tool as short as possible.
- Define the terms used so that all respondents have the same understanding of what is being asked. For example, if you use the term "child care" intending it to mean any care provided while a parent works or goes to school, make sure you have the screener explain that. Otherwise, the parent may think you are only referring to more formal child care arrangements.
- Tell callers about any stipend you are providing and ask them about child care and transportation needs if those incentives are offered. If they request child care, ask them whether their child has any special needs so you can plan accordingly.
- In order to gauge the effectiveness of your recruitment strategies, it is helpful to include a question asking callers how they heard about your project.

Registration form. The registration form is filled out by participants at the beginning of the focus group session. If a parent is unable to read, a staff member can read the form to the parent and enter the information. It provides researchers with basic demographic, background, and program-specific information needed for the analysis of the focus group findings. The procedure insures that all information is collected uniformly and that time is not wasted during the session itself asking each participant to provide these details. It also serves as a method of gathering information on potentially sensitive topics—income, total hours a child is in child care—that participants may be reluctant to share in the group. Later, during analysis of the focus group transcripts, statements of the participants can be matched with information on the registration form to better understand their experiences.

Here are some suggestions for developing this form:

- Choose your questions carefully. You do not want to overwhelm parents with a lengthy and complicated form.
- To measure the opinions of participants, you may want to ask them to respond using a scale. For example, "On a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being the most satisfied and 1 being the least satisfied, rate your satisfaction with the process of enrolling in Medicaid."
- If one of the purposes of conducting focus groups is to make contact with parents and engage them in your work, you might want to make sure you have a way of reaching them after the focus group session.

In addition to asking for their own contact information, you also might want to ask for the name and phone number of someone who could reach them if they move. (See Chapter Eight for more on parent engagement)

- Provide a place on the registration form where participants can ask to have a copy of the final report of the focus group findings sent to them.

Field Note

In our special needs project, we found the registration document especially useful because we needed detailed information about the various conditions of the children. On our screening form, we included a few very general questions about the diagnosis of the child with special needs and the parents' concerns about their child's development. The registration form gave us the opportunity to ask more detailed questions about the nature and severity of the disability—information that later allowed us to do a more complete analysis of the focus group findings.

Focus group script/protocol. The script (or as researchers term it, "protocol") determines the content of the discussion within each group. It contains a list of probing questions designed to elicit answers to your broader research questions. Research questions are rarely asked directly in the focus group sessions. Instead, composing the script involves considerable thought about what specific probes would best get at the broader questions you want answered for the project.

For example, if you want to know why parents are not using child care centers, you would never ask that question directly. Doing so might imply that you favor center-based care and are challenging the decisions parents have made for their children. Giving the impression that you are injecting your own value judgment into the discussion would undermine the neutrality of your research and inhibit parents from speaking freely about their experiences. A better way to get at this question would be to ask in a neutral way what kind of child care arrangements they have; then ask them to talk about their reasons for choosing that child care and whether it is meeting their needs and those of their child.

Your facilitator, especially if he or she is experienced in conducting focus groups with low-income families, will be an invaluable source of help as you develop the protocol. Involve the facilitator throughout the drafting process. In preparing the protocol questions, keep the following considerations in mind:

- The protocol should begin with an introductory section to provide information about the sponsoring organization, introduce staff, explain the purpose of the focus groups and assure participants that their identities will be kept confidential. It should also include the fact that the sessions are being taped..

- Except for changes in the protocol based on what you learn in the pilot focus group session, the same questions need to be addressed in the same sequence in all groups; the greater the consistency, the easier it will be to analyze the findings. Still, within these parameters, the facilitator should be free to probe more deeply if the parents' responses to a particular question warrant further inquiry.
- To elicit the richest possible information and make the most efficient use of the time allotted make sure your team takes the time to discuss at length how questions are to be asked and the types of answers they are likely to generate. (See Field Note.)
- Never ask "yes" or "no" questions.
- "Why" is rarely asked in focus groups because it tends to imply that there is a right or wrong answer making participants feel judged. It is better to ask "what" or "how" participants feel about the topic.
- Consider the experiences of all participants in your focus groups. For example, when questions are asked about parents' opinions of the child care their child is receiving, stay-at-home parents may have nothing to contribute. Acknowledge that fact and follow with questions relevant to their situation.
- Avoid asking about general satisfaction with services—you may only get less fruitful "yes" or "no" answers. Instead, ask specific questions that allow participants to tell their stories and provide rich detail about their experiences.

Field Note

In our project on child care and child health insurance, we found that it was very important to keep our target population and their particular circumstances in mind when developing the protocol. For example, to help us gauge parents' satisfaction with the care their children were receiving, we could have asked the general question, "What do you look for in a child care setting?" Given the economic circumstances of the target population, however, we worried that we might get responses that referred only to their most immediate and practical concerns: cost, transportation, adequacy of coverage of their work hours. We may never have discovered what value they might place on factors that more directly affect their children, such as learning activities or the degree to which individual attention is provided by child care staff.

Accordingly, we decided to separate out questions about how the child care they were using was meeting *their* needs from questions about how it was serving their *child's* needs. We first asked, "Does your child care arrangement work for *you*?" This brought references to such concerns as coverage of work hours, flexibility, cost, and transportation. Then we asked, "Does your child care work for *your child*?" To follow up on that question, we also asked "What would you want in a child care arrangement for your child?" "Is there anything you would change about the child care program your child is in?" By asking these questions, we were able to obtain insights into how these parents felt about their child's experiences in child care—information we might have missed entirely if we had asked the more general question.

Consent forms. To insure that parents are participating in the focus groups with informed consent, you need to develop forms for parents to read and sign before the focus group discussion begins. Consent forms should:

- Outline assurances of confidentiality.
- Describe the procedures the research team will follow to protect the identity of the participant. (See more on these procedures in Chapter Seven under "Ethical Obligations to Participants.")
- Inform participants that they have the right to withdraw from the discussion at any time, without penalty, should they become uncomfortable with the subject matter.
- Ask parents to keep confidential anything said by other parents during the focus group discussion.

Field Note

When we were screening parents for our special needs project one parent said she wanted to participate but was concerned that there might be another parent from the same child care program her child attended in the focus group session. If that turned out to be the case, she feared that any concerns she raised about her child's care would get back to the child care staff and she would lose her child care. This raised two issues: the critical need to reiterate to participants their obligation to keep what's said in the session confidential and the need, wherever possible, to choose parents who have no such connection to each other when forming your focus groups. (See Chapter Six for a discussion of how to group and select participants.)

5 Planning for the Focus Group Sessions

Once your focus group instruments are written and the protocol drafted, you can begin the final planning stage: preparing for the sessions themselves. This chapter will discuss how and when to schedule focus groups and how to choose sites.

How should you schedule the focus groups?

Before you start recruiting and screening parents, you need to have some idea of how many focus groups you will conduct in a given community and when you might conduct them. In scheduling the sessions, first consider which focus groups can be conducted together geographically—perhaps two to three in the same region, city, or neighborhood. Depending on how well recruitment goes and the amount of time you have to complete your project, you may be able to schedule clusters of focus groups two weeks apart. That will allow time for screening, adjustment of recruitment strategies, site selection, and logistical details. The logistical coordinator also will be able to spend enough time talking to the community group staff to engage them and provide closer oversight and support. (See Field Note.)

Field Note

The optimum in scheduling is not always possible. In our special needs project, recruitment was so slow for our first few sessions that we had to begin recruiting in several communities at once or we would have fallen seriously behind schedule. If you have the staff available, it may make sense to have more than one logistical coordinator so that the communities can be split up among several staff members.

Some suggestions concerning scheduling:

- **Get the advice of community groups.** Your partners in the community will be an important source of information about the work patterns of the local populations you are targeting. They can suggest optimum times for holding the sessions. They also might know if there is a competing local event that could reduce attendance.
- **Avoid days of the week when families are more likely to have other plans.** We were advised that there would be a higher likelihood of no shows at the end of the work week. Some advised against weekend sessions as well. Again, your community groups will be the best source of advice on this question.
- **Do not assume traditional work schedules.** Daytime or afternoon groups may work better for some parents.

- **Set reasonable hours.** Plan start times for evening groups to accommodate travel time and to enable the sessions to end at a reasonable hour, particularly if you are holding the session on a school night.
- **Keep sessions within the time allotted.** If the session itself will take about an hour and a half, leave another half hour at the beginning so parents will have time to fill out the registration and consent forms, settle their children, and have refreshments. Be sure not to exceed the agreed-upon time limit.

How do you choose the sites?

The location of your focus group plays an important role in the comfort of your participants as well as the ease of recording, and providing refreshments, child care and transportation. Do your best to choose sites that fit the bill, but expect to deal with the unexpected and be ready to be flexible! The following guidelines may help:

- **A comfortable, easy-to-reach setting.** The best location would be one near public transportation and familiar to participants. A community center, church, child care center, hospital, or neighborhood health clinic might qualify.
- **A neutral setting.** Choose a neutral environment. Avoid locations that might make participants uneasy or have a chilling effect on the conversation, such as a state agency or a work site.
- **Room accommodations.** Make sure there are tables for registration materials and for the discussion itself and outlets for the tape recorder. The note taker and observer should have room to sit away from the group but close enough to allow the microphone to pick up the voices of all the participants. The table for the focus group participants should be large enough to seat everyone facing each other with the facilitator at one end.
- **Child care arrangements.** Choose a site that has a separate area for child care, preferably with toys and room for activities, that is safe for children of all ages.
- **No competing activities.** Ask if other activities will be going on at the time of the focus group session. Otherwise you may be surprised to discover on arrival that a teen activity program is going on in an adjoining room. The noise could distract participants and drown out their voices on the tape recorder.

TIP

Child care centers work particularly well as focus group sites. They are comfortable, have ample activities for the children in a safe environment, and may offer kitchen facilities for refreshments.

6 Recruitment, Screening, and Selection of Participants

Once you have developed a schedule for your focus groups and selected your sites, you're ready to start the process of finding and screening potential participants for your focus groups. This chapter will prepare you for what you might expect as you go through this phase of your project.

What system do you use for fielding calls from interested parents?

Before recruitment can begin, you will need a system in place for fielding phone calls from interested parents and screening them as potential participants, so that the appropriate phone number can be put on the recruitment materials before you distribute them. You might choose to set up a toll-free number that routes the calls to your office where one or two staff members field the calls centrally and conduct the screenings. Or, you could have the community groups field the calls and screen parents using a local phone number. Sometimes community groups will recommend this arrangement if they think parents in their community would hesitate to call an unknown entity at a toll-free number.

In weighing these options keep in mind that you will have less control over the screening process if the community groups field the calls, especially if you are not able to be on site when the calls come in. Despite being trained on the importance of consistency, there's always the danger that some screeners may improvise or change questions in the script in reaction to what a caller says, and you might never know it. Such inconsistencies could seriously affect the mix of parents you are able to get or bias the content of the focus group discussions. Using community group screeners is probably less of a risk if the focus of your topic is narrow enough that they are asking only one or two questions before inviting parents. But if the scope of your research requires more extensive questioning on the screening forms, then you may want more control over the process by having staff from your own organization do the screening. Also keep in mind that the more people you involve in the screening process, the greater the risk that promises of confidentiality may be breached.

How do you recruit parents who fit the criteria of your target population?

Once your system for fielding calls is in place and the phone number is put on your recruitment materials, you are ready to begin the process of finding parents for your focus groups. As any researcher will tell you, recruitment can be the most unpredictable aspect of a focus group project. You need to begin with some assumptions about what strategies will work with the population and how many parents are likely to respond to your recruitment efforts. Based on these assumptions, you can determine the number of focus groups to hold, the ideal mix of parents you would like included, and how you might group the parents into specific sessions.

Be prepared, however, for these original assumptions to be incorrect! You may not attract as many parents as you had anticipated. While every researcher wants to recruit as large a pool as possible in order to produce the richest information, it's important to remember that focus group participants are not meant to represent a statistically valid sample of any larger population. As long as your recruitment strategies involve a wide variety of sources and produce enough eligible parents to allow you to hold a reasonable number of focus groups, the credibility of your findings will not be compromised. (See Field Note.)

Field Note

In our special needs project, recruitment was much slower than we had anticipated. Despite a wide and diversified recruitment effort, our pool simply wasn't large enough to give us the luxury of choosing among eligible parents and grouping them in any prescribed way. As calls trickled in, we were fortunate if we found enough parents who met our basic criteria to go ahead and schedule a group. We were forced to make a number of mid-course adjustments to our recruitment strategies—from doubling the stipend we offered parents to having the local school systems send flyers home in the backpacks of all of their elementary school students. In one community these changes produced calls almost immediately while in another they seemed to make no difference at all! One step that proved invaluable in gauging the effectiveness of these recruitment strategies was to have our screeners ask parents how they heard about the project.

CAUTION

Try not to become so wedded to any one recruitment strategy that you delay making needed changes if recruitment is slow. No matter how carefully you plan ahead, nothing will completely eliminate the unpredictability of this phase of your project. Trial and error is the key to surviving it!

How long should the recruitment process take?

Ideally, recruitment should not be done too far in advance of when you plan to hold your focus group: you do not want to increase the risk of parents not being able to attend because of a change in schedule. A two-week time period is ideal.

Of course, if recruitment goes slowly, you may have to give up that ideal, delay your scheduled focus group session, and continue to recruit until you have enough eligible parents to hold a focus group. Early callers will need to be put "on hold" while you adjust and intensify your recruitment efforts. (See Field Note.)

Field Note

Because recruitment for our special needs project was taking so long, we had a system for regularly calling back those parents screened early in the process. We were able to keep them posted on our progress and make sure they were still interested in participating. The parents seemed very understanding, and most did eventually attend one of our sessions.

What sources are best for recruiting parents?

Your strategies for locating and recruiting parents will vary to some degree from community to community, and the sources you choose will depend on the nature of your research questions. The community groups you have chosen to work with will be an excellent source of advice about these issues. Again, the goal is to insure that a mix of circumstances and experiences is represented among the parents in your focus groups. To accomplish this you should choose the widest possible range of sources for parents who fit the criteria you have set for your target population. Say, for example, you wish to find out what parents' experiences are in accessing child care. If you use Head Start as your sole source of parents you will miss the diversity of circumstances—type of child care used, income range of family, age of child—that will allow you to fully understand the policy issues involved. Perhaps you want to learn about the adequacy of access to services for children with special needs: you will want to go to early intervention programs that serve this population; but you will also want to go to more generic sources (e.g., community centers, churches) to locate families whose children may not be receiving any services, despite their special needs.

TIP

Using a variety of sources for recruitment will also reduce your chances of inviting focus group participants who know each other. Researchers have found that it is preferable to have strangers in the sessions because participants often find it harder to divulge personal matters if friends or neighbors are in the room. There's an additional risk in recruiting parents from a single work site: some participants might be in a supervisory position over others in the group, causing discomfort during the discussion.

How do you publicize the focus groups through the sources you've selected?

Once you have decided on the best sources for locating parents, you need to determine the most effective ways to publicize the focus groups. Again, your community groups will be an important source of advice about which methods might be most effective with the parents in their community. (See Appendix E for a list of the types of sources you might use for recruiting low-income parents and ideas for publicizing your project.)

Once that's decided, your last step in the recruitment phase is to distribute your publicity materials to all the sources you have identified. You may also be able to give presentations to likely groups of parents. The staff of the community groups should be able to help you with this part of the process.

TIP

Remember that materials such as flyers and posters will have to be translated into the appropriate language for the population you are trying to reach.

How do you screen callers?

Once calls begin to come in, whoever is designated to do the screening will use the screening tool you have developed to collect information from the parents. It may work well to establish voicemail for callers to leave messages expressing their interest so that screeners are not bombarded throughout the day with calls.

Keep in mind the following points during the screening process:

- **Training.** Before they begin to field calls, train screeners to keep to the script when talking to parents. Make sure they don't convey to callers through their words or tone that there is a certain message you want to hear in the focus group sessions. You might role-play to allow them to practice asking the questions.
- **Confidentiality.** Make sure parents understand that the information shared during the screening call will be kept confidential; if community groups screen, make it clear that they need to return screening forms to your office in order to protect the confidentiality of callers.
- **Parents without phones.** Be aware that screening only by phone may exclude families who can't afford telephone service; the very families who might be most at risk. Look to community groups for help in recruiting parents from at least a few families without phone service; they may be able to leave the number of a relative or neighbor who can find them when you call back.
- **Language barriers.** Make sure that your voicemail message includes information in the language of any subpopulation you are recruiting. Anyone assigned to screen non-English speakers needs to be trained in your screening process.
- **Clear expectations.** Because the name of the community group will be listed on the recruitment flyers, some participants may come to the focus group session thinking they will receive assistance or services.

TIP

If you are using voicemail to take messages from callers, be sure the message asks parents for the best times to reach them.

To avoid disappointment, make sure that parents understand during the screening process that the purpose of these sessions is to learn about their experiences so improvements in programs and policies can be made. (See Chapter Six for a discussion of outreach materials and your ethical obligations to parents.)

What happens during the final selection process?

If you are using only the threshold criteria to select participants, you might have screeners invite parents during the initial screening call as soon as they determine that the person meets your criteria. However, if your screening questions are more extensive, and you have attracted a large enough pool of eligible parents, then you will want to review the information collected before inviting anyone to determine who best represents the mix of demographic factors and family circumstances you desire.

How many participants should attend each group?

For most focus group sessions, eight participants constitutes a manageable size for letting people "have their say" and for analyzing the results; the facilitator will not need to become overly involved in order to keep the group under control, and participants will have more time to speak. Larger groups also increase the likelihood of side-conversations. However, if you are dealing with particularly sensitive issues, you may want fewer than eight participants. In our special needs project, we found that groups of five worked much better because of the emotions that surfaced in the discussions. Experts suggest that you over-select by 20 percent to account for no-shows. Invite 10-12 parents to get 8-9 participants.

Ideally, experts say that you should have at least four participants in a focus group. If no-shows cause the group to slip below that number, you can cancel the session, but you should still pay stipends to those who show up as a gesture of appreciation.

TIP

If you enter the screening information into a data base, you can see at a glance the range of circumstances and characteristics of the families you've screened.

You might be confronted with the opposite situation if uninvited participants show up. You can include all of them in the group provided that the group's total number does not exceed 10 to 12 and the information on their registration form demonstrates that they meet your eligibility criteria. If you do have to turn away any of these parents, you are under no obligation to pay them a stipend since they were never screened or invited by your staff.

How do you group parents into focus group sessions?

The comfort level of parents is your most important consideration when you begin to assign participants to particular sessions. Your goal is to create an environment that will allow them to speak freely. A common grouping in focus groups is by race and ethnicity. By separating racial and ethnic groups, the discussions will be more likely to capture differences in experiences. However, the nature of your research questions may present other considerations which could "trump" race and ethnicity in deciding how to place parents into focus groups. Depending on your topic, it might make more sense to group participants by such factors as gender, marital status, or age. (See Field Note.)

Field Note

In our special needs project, the pilot focus group session revealed unique and intense sensitivities raised by parents of children with behavioral problems and/or neurological or emotional disabilities. We thought that if we placed parents of children with these disabilities in a group of their own, they might feel more comfortable expressing the particular concerns and emotions they felt in caring for their children. In this project, the nature of the child's disability seemed a more important consideration than race and ethnicity.

Decisions about how to group participants are critical to the quality and richness of your results. Take the time to make as careful a judgment as you can and use your pilot session to test your decisions. Of course, the pace and robustness of your recruitment effort will affect these choices as well. A large pool of eligible parents allows you more options—the ideal situation from a researcher's standpoint. However, if your recruitment is slow and your pool of eligible parents very small, how you group the parents will be the least of your worries! You may have no choice but to simply fill the sessions with eligible parents as you screen them.

CAUTION

If your pool of eligible parents is large enough, it is always best to schedule at least two focus groups of any one subpopulation, or in any one community, to avoid your results being skewed by one aberrant session.

What information should you provide when inviting the parents?

Once you have selected the participants, call and invite them to attend. Remember to:

- Provide the date, time, and location of the focus group session.
- Ask parents if they will need transportation and/or child care.
- If they request child care, ask if any special accommodations are needed for their child.
- Remind them that refreshments will be provided.
- Remind them that they will be paid a cash stipend for participating.
- Tell them you will follow up with a reminder call a day or two before the date. You might want to call parents one more time on the morning of the focus group session.
- Thank the parents for their important contribution to your project; tell them you look forward to hearing about their experiences.

For the parents who accept, prepare a list of their names and contact information to provide to staff at the sessions.

7 Conducting the Focus Groups

You have chosen your focus group participants and made final phone calls to remind parents to attend. This chapter will prepare you to conduct the focus group sessions. It describes the equipment and supplies you need, the structure of the discussion, the role staff members play, the advantages of testing with a pilot group, and your ethical obligations to the parents.

What supports do participants need at the sessions?

First, make sure the following supports for the participants are in place:

- **Child care.** Offer child care, preferably in an adjoining room, while the parents are in the sessions. You may need to recruit child care workers and pay them. If you use volunteers instead, try to arrange for a professional child care worker to supervise them—especially if you expect any children with special needs.
- **Refreshments.** Serve pizza, sub sandwiches, or some other convenient food, beverages, and dessert; make sure you have enough for the children.
- **Transportation assistance.** Depending on the location of your site, you may arrange for a volunteer with a van to pick up parents and bring them to the session. This worked well in one of our sites where traffic problems made it difficult for parents to get there on their own. In rural areas where distances are greater, offering to reimburse for mileage may be particularly important to insuring attendance.
- **Stipends.** Stipends (usually $25 to $50) probably provide the greatest incentive for attendance, so be sure to consider the appropriate amount for your location. The level of stipend will vary across the country, but within the same state, you should pay the same stipend to everyone. Stipends should be paid in cash, not checks.

TIP

If you hold your session in a child care center, be aware that the equipment and toys there may only be appropriate for very young children. Have videos or age-appropriate games on hand for older children.

What equipment or supplies are necessary to conduct the focus group sessions?

At the session, you will need:

- portable tape recorder;
- extension cord and back-up batteries;
- sensitive microphone;
- extra audio tapes;
- registration forms;
- consent forms;
- nametags and/or place cards or “tents” for the facilitator and participants to place in front of them at the table;
- pads and extra pens for note takers;
- napkins, plates, and serving utensils;
- refreshments brought with you or delivered to the site;
- child care equipment, if not supplied at the site (videos, toys);
- outreach materials appropriate to your target population;
- tissues in case someone becomes emotional during the discussion;
- cash stipends in individual envelopes; and
- cash to pay the child care workers if you are not using volunteers.

TIP

Before choosing the recording equipment you will use at the session, test it in a setting similar to the conditions you expect at the focus group. We tested the mike and recorder during one of our staff meetings to make sure it picked up voices at different distances around the table during lengthy discussions.

TIP

Be sure to have extra cash stipends at the sessions in order to pay uninvited parents who might show up, meet your eligibility criteria, and end up participating in the focus group.

What is involved in setting up before the sessions?

Have your staff arrive at the site at least one hour in advance to allow time to set up the room, arrange the child care, and meet the community group staff. Before the session:

- **Set up the table.** Arrange the focus group table so that all participants have eye contact with each other and with the facilitator. Test whether the mike and the tape recorder can pick up voices at different distances around the table.
- **Set up the refreshments.** Lay out the refreshments in a location away from the focus group table, if possible. It works best to have participants eat before the discussion begins.
- **Greet the parents.** In the half hour you have allowed before the 90-minute discussion, have a staff member greet the parents as they arrive, show them where the child care is being provided, offer refreshments, and explain the forms they need to fill out. Your note taker and observer might share these responsibilities.

TIP

Do not be surprised if family or household members of the parent you invited show up. Make sure that all members who participate in the discussion sign a consent form; however, only one member needs to fill out the registration form providing information on that family. You should pay the stipend only to the invited parent, not to each household member.

- **Determine eligibility.** For any parents who show up uninvited and therefore unscreened, be sure to quickly check their registration form after they fill it out to determine if they meet your criteria for participation in the focus groups. (See Chapter Six for a discussion of the inclusion/exclusion of uninvited parents.)
- **Distribute name tags and place cards/tents.** Parents should be provided with name tags and place cards or "tents" to use on the focus group table to help the facilitator, note taker and observer properly identify them when they speak. Using the list of participants supplied by the screeners, write only the first name of each parent to preserve confidentiality.

How does the facilitator manage the session?

A skilled facilitator is the key to success for any focus group project. Traits of a good facilitator are:

- an ability to listen and think at the same time;
- an ability to use everyday language;
- being sufficiently knowledgeable about the topic being discussed to be able to follow-up on parents' statements;
- having the interpersonal skills to make parents feel comfortable and engender their trust; and
- possessing the skills needed to direct the discussion so it stays on track but does not lose the casual feel of a conversation.

The session should proceed as follows:

- **Introductions.** Once the session begins, the facilitator should introduce or re-introduce himself or herself, as well as any other staff people who will be in the room during the session.
- **Purpose of project.** The facilitator should go over the purpose of the project and provide the names of the sponsoring organizations.
- **Use of an icebreaker.** Start the questions with an icebreaker. Our facilitator asked participants to introduce themselves and tell the group one thing they have learned since becoming a parent. She first answered that question herself in order to put the parents at ease.
- **Reminders to parents.** Once everyone is introduced, the facilitator should inform participants that their conversation is being recorded, that all discussions will be kept confidential, and that they have an obligation to keep information they hear from other participants confidential. She or he should review the goals of the session and answer any questions. Parents should be reminded to speak up and talk one at a time to insure that their voices are picked up by the tape recorder.

- **The discussion.** The discussion then proceeds according to the protocol, with participants answering questions and the facilitator engaging participants who may seem reluctant to speak. While following the protocol, the facilitator needs to be flexible enough to ask follow-up questions when appropriate. Assign the observer the task of keeping track of the time so that the session will end when promised.
- **Identifying speakers.** The transcriber of the tapes will have a much easier task if the facilitator manages to identify speakers by their first name each time they speak.

CAUTION

Our transcriber for our special needs project told us that when portions of a focus group tape are unintelligible, it is usually because people were talking over each other. If this seems to be happening during the session, your facilitator should remind participants of the importance of not interrupting each other.

What roles do the note taker and observer play?

The note taker captures in writing as much detail as possible during the conversation. The observer is present to record the nonverbal cues—nods, shrugs, and such facial expressions as surprise and sadness—that supplement the words parents use to describe their perceptions and experiences. Either the note taker or the observer can operate the tape equipment.

These notes and observations serve three purposes: 1.) they provide a back-up should the tape recorder fail or the tapes contain gaps; 2.) they provide a way for the transcriber to identify who is speaking on the tape; and 3.) they provide a written record of what was communicated verbally and nonverbally which can help the person analyzing the information gain a more complete picture of what went on in the discussion, to supplement the transcriptions of the tapes.

The note taker and observer should be seated away from the group and never be involved in the discussion in any way. They should not distract the participants, interrupt the group, or use such body language as nodding their head, or frowning, that would convey their opinion of anything the participants say. This is not to say that they need to be expressionless. Consistency is the key. It's fine to act warmly and look interested as long as it's done in response to all of the participants' comments. It may help to arrange a nonverbal signal that can be used unobtrusively to alert the facilitator if a participant is speaking too quietly to be picked up by the microphone.

The note taker needs to develop a system to identify the participants when they speak while at the same time preserving their confidentiality. One approach is to write down the first initial of the speaker's first name and the first three words they say every time they speak. This method will provide a back-up to the identification of speakers on the tape; in a lively discussion it may not be possible for the facilitator to identify participants by name each time they talk. If there are two participants whose first names start with the same letter, you can code these with a number as well (T1 and T2.) The transcriber listening to the tapes of the sessions can then accurately identify who is speaking using the same coding method.

TIP

In our special needs project one of our note takers found it more efficient to use a laptop to take her notes. This did not seem to distract the parents or interfere with their discussion.

What happens at the end of the session?

Thank all the parents for their contributions. If a report on the findings is being printed, remind participants that they may have a copy sent to them so they will have a sense of what happens next in the project and feel included in the process.

Before parents leave, the logistical coordinator should provide them with the cash stipend and make outreach materials available. (See the discussion on use of outreach materials later in this chapter.)

TIP

Except for the facilitator, note taker, and observer, all additional staff members or outside persons should be out of the view of the participants during the discussion session.

TIP

All team members in attendance should jot down any lessons learned or issues that arise during the session so they can be discussed later by the research team.

Should you conduct a pilot focus group?

It's always a good idea to conduct a pilot focus group. Pilots provide researchers with an opportunity to debrief afterwards and decide what worked and what did not. Such instruments as the protocol and registration form should be reviewed, as well as the arrangement of the room, the number of participants, the accommodations for child care, and so forth. During the pilot, the observer can time responses to questions in order to evaluate whether too many topics are included or whether any of the questions are too broad. Schedule enough time between the pilot and the succeeding groups to allow for any adjustments that might be necessary. If your experience in the pilot dictates major changes in the protocol that affect the meaning of questions, the pilot focus group discussion must be set aside and not included in the analysis of your findings. If only minor changes are made, and the basic meaning of your questions remains the same, then the discussion can be included for purposes of your analysis. (See Field Note.)

Field Note

After the pilot focus group session of our special needs project, we didn't alter the meaning of the questions in our protocol, but we did clarify them and make them more appropriate to the ways in which our target population thought about child care. Our original protocol gave the false impression that we were referring to any out-of-home care as child care provided so that parents could work. This definition turned out to be much too limited for the parents in our sessions, and the terms we used seemed to cause a fair amount of confusion. They weren't used to thinking about out-of-home care as "child care" in the traditional sense: many of their children were in part-day special programs to address their disabilities and that was the primary reason they were in any kind of out-of-home care.

We wanted to capture those experiences and report how those programs addressed their children's needs, as well as their own. Accordingly, in our revised protocol, we didn't use the term "child care" but instead referred to "programs" or "care arrangements," and defined those terms broadly, so that we could hear about special education or early intervention programs as well as the more traditional "child care" situations. In subsequent sessions, our questions were better understood by participants, and the discussion went much more smoothly.

Field Note

While a two-way mirror is not necessary to conduct focus groups, we did find that it was helpful for one of our pilot sessions because it allowed the entire team to observe and be involved in the debriefing. While we had a concern initially that the participants might be inhibited by the knowledge that unseen people were observing, we did not find that this was a problem. When they were told, they raised no concerns and it did not seem to distract them or affect their willingness to take part in the discussions.

Caution

Be aware that your pilot cannot serve to alert you to all of the problems or issues that may occur in your later sessions. At a different site, at a different time, with a different group, you could get very different reactions and results. It's therefore best to consider the pilot as a chance to test your instruments and protocol for major oversights or mistakes that can then be corrected. Do not depend on it as a foolproof method for guaranteeing success in future sessions.

How do you deal with language barriers?

Depending on your location, it may be important to include those who only speak, or are more comfortable speaking, languages other than English. If you want to include non-English speaking parents, try not to place them in the same group with parents whose first language is English, expecting them to participate through the use of an interpreter. Try instead to attract enough parents with the same language to form a separate focus group. Even then you have the question of whether to use a facilitator who speaks their language or have an English speaking facilitator work with a simultaneous translator. In our experience, it is far better to use a facilitator who can conduct the entire session in the participants' first language. The observer, note taker, and child care providers must also speak that language.

If you do end up having to use a simultaneous translator, make sure you emphasize with him or her that it is always necessary to translate word for word. For example, if a participant makes a statement that is then followed by another participant's comment, the translator should never say only that the second speaker "is saying the same thing" or "agrees." The second statement should also be translated word for word to capture the nuances and additional information she or he may have given in expressing agreement. If a translator is going to be used, it may be necessary to schedule extra time for the session.

Field Note

In one of our focus group projects, we attempted to use a simultaneous translator and a facilitator who could only understand a little Spanish. It didn't work very well, and because of translation issues—both expected and unexpected—our Spanish language group lasted an extra hour.

What are your ethical obligations to participants?

Your organization has invited parents to come and talk about their experiences before strangers—with a tape recorder running. As a researcher, you bear a major responsibility for insuring that these parents, who have volunteered to let you see into their lives, are treated with respect and protected from breaches of confidentiality. The elements of these obligations are:

Informed consent. Provide parents with a copy of the consent form they sign to take with them after the session. Throughout the process of talking with parents—in the screening, at registration and at the beginning of the focus group session—issues of confidentiality should be stressed. (See Chapter Three for a discussion of the content of the consent form.)

Right to withdraw. The consent form must inform the participants of their right to withdraw from the group at any time, without penalty, should they become uncomfortable with the topic under discussion.

Securing confidential information. Take the following steps to make sure that confidential information about the participants remains secure:

- All staff involved (researchers, note takers, community group staff who screen) must comply with the procedures you establish for securing identifying information.
- Research staff should sign a form assuring that they will not divulge any identifying information without the written permission of participants. (See Appendix I for the form we used.)
- Notes and transcriptions should be coded and kept separate from participant lists to lessen the risk of statements being tied to participants by name. (See discussion of coding earlier in this chapter and in Chapter Eight.)
- Screening tools, participant lists, and tapes should be returned to the primary organization to be stored in locked cabinets with all other identifying materials. These materials should eventually be destroyed. Some researchers recommend waiting five years to do so in case you need to re-analyze the data or check the original forms.

Providing information to participants. Outreach materials on programs that relate to the issues being discussed in your focus groups should be provided at the sessions. While parents should not in any way be led to expect they are attending the sessions to receive direct services, the sponsoring organizations have an ethical obligation to at least inform parents about available help they might need. **To avoid affecting the discussion in any way, these materials should not be handed out until after the session is over.** (See Field Note.)

Field Note

In our project on child care and child health insurance, we found that in the case of a child care subsidy program that had run out of funding temporarily, parents placed on waiting lists for assistance still expressed great frustration at the lack of outreach information about eligibility, benefits, and enrollment. Because the funding situation prevented parents from enrolling, the agency staff who administered the program provided them with little information about the operation of the program or, for that matter, the waiting list! We learned from that experience that if no outreach materials exist, a simple fact sheet should be created to hand out after the focus group sessions. These materials should be provided in the primary language spoken by the focus group participants.

Expressing appreciation. Follow up courtesies are important. Send a letter to participants shortly after the session expressing your gratitude for their participation and reminding them that you will send them a copy of the final report if they desire one. You will also want to send a copy of the report to everyone who helped you—from the policy experts you interviewed to the community sources you consulted.

Send a thank you letter as well to the community groups that served as your partners. You might choose to send them a financial contribution or provide an item their organization needs as an additional gesture of appreciation.

8 Analyzing and Reporting Focus Group Findings

You have tape recordings of your focus group sessions. You have written notes of the discussions and notes recorded by the observer about non-verbal cues. You have basic information about the participants from their registration forms. This chapter will discuss transcribing the tapes, organizing the data, and analyzing and reporting the results. It will also briefly describe how focus groups can be used to design further research. Lastly, it will list ways in which you can follow up with the participants in your focus groups, after the sessions, to engage them in your advocacy work.

What is involved in transcribing tapes of the focus group sessions?

First, make back-up copies of the tapes before you give them to a transcription service or your in-house transcriber. Whereas statistical software is useful for organizing and analyzing your data from the registration forms, for transcribing the tapes of the sessions you need only a word processing program like Microsoft Word.

As explained in Chapter Seven, the facilitator will have identified speakers by their first names on the tape and the note taker will have connected the participants to their quotes by use of a code. This approach insures confidentiality because the transcriber can now transcribe the tapes without including the names of the parents. The codes will also help the person analyzing the data match statements of participants to information each of the parents supplied on the registration forms which are coded in the same way. (See next section in this chapter.) In the final report, quotes can then be attributed to a brief profile of the speaker—"a mother of two from Alexandria" or "a father of a toddler in Head Start"—providing a context for the parents' statements and opinions

TIP

Begin transcribing your tapes as soon as you've held your first session. Don't wait until all the sessions have been completed.

How do you analyze the data?

Registration forms. It helps to have access to statistical software such as SPSS or SAS to analyze the information collected on the registration forms. First, put the code you develop for each participant on each registration form. Then, right after the first focus group, you can begin entering registration information into the statistical program to save time later. While the data from these registration forms cannot be used to say anything about a larger population, a profile of session participants will flesh out your analysis of the themes that emerge from the focus group discussions. A separate section of your final report can provide the reader with an overall sense of the population that participated (for example, "50% of participants were working full time" or "25% of children of participants were in center-based care".)

Transcripts. You need to develop a method to analyze the focus group transcripts. If you think you will be conducting focus group projects fairly often, you might invest in a software program designed for what is known as “qualitative” data analysis. Such programs as NUD*IST, NVivo, or Ethnograph allow the user to edit, code, and link transcripts and other documents in order to identify themes and match quotes with those themes. The software can also link statements made by participants with the attributes collected from the registration forms. (Numerous sites for these software packages can be found on the Internet listed under their names.) Be aware, however, that these relatively new programs can be expensive and they require intensive, specialized training. If you are considering hiring outside researchers, you might ask them whether they use these programs. They make analysis quicker and more efficient, and they also enable far more effective presentations of the findings when you release your report.

If you do not have access to these programs, there are alternative ways to organize the analysis. The following are steps the person doing the analysis of the data can take, based on our experience analyzing data for the child care and child health insurance project. (These steps are written as instructions for whomever you designate to take the lead in analyzing the data and writing the final report.)

- **Listen to the tapes.** If you have only attended some of the sessions, you will want to listen to the tapes, in addition to reading the transcripts, to pick up on the tone and intensity of the parents’ remarks.
- **Read the transcripts.** Read through all of the transcripts at least once, preferably at one sitting, highlighting major issue areas and identifying emerging themes.
- **Read the focus group notes.** Reading the notes taken by the note taker and observer will alert you to nonverbal communication that will help you understand what the parents were trying to convey.
- **Organize the information.** You might use the search function in your word processing program to identify quotes by theme and place them into your files and folders. This will work at least for your initial organization of the information. However, to be able to easily manipulate the data, you may want to use a system of index cards, color coded for major issues and themes, and cut and paste the relevant quotes you’ve put in your files onto the cards. Beside each quote, write the code for that participant and the date of the focus group so that later, you can refer to information collected from the registration forms. By using index cards, you can sort and reorganize the quotes as new themes emerge or as the order of subjects in the final report changes. You can also sort by focus group session to determine whether there were geographic, racial, or ethnic differences, depending on how your focus groups were organized. The cards become a manual, albeit much less sophisticated, substitute for the qualitative data software packages mentioned above.

Whatever system you choose to organize the data, keep in mind the following points during your analysis:

- **Be as objective as you can.** Try to maintain your objectivity as you interpret the words of the parents, decide what weight to give different points of view, and draw conclusions and policy implications from the findings. The more objective you can be, the more likely that your findings will be credible.
- **Leave behind preconceived ideas or personal opinions.** Go into the analysis with an open mind. Avoid lifting quotes out of context, jumping to conclusions before reading all of the transcripts, or giving undue weight to one theme or another because it supports your own agenda.
- **When reporting participants' opinions do not use numbers or percentages.** You can report basic information off of the registration form in numbers or percentages—"30% of parents reported having family incomes below the federal poverty level" or "24% used informal child care arrangements." However, when reporting opinions expressed in the sessions, do not count up how many expressed a particular point of view and report that as a number or percentage. Doing so implies to the reader that the opinions can be projected to a larger population, which is not the case with focus group research (see Chapter One). Instead, say "several participants believed . . ." or "most participants expressed a strong preference for . . ."
- **Edit the quotes where necessary.** It is O.K. to edit messy or lengthy quotations as long as you are still able to capture the meaning intended by the speaker. For example, in a reference to the experience of dealing with state agencies, one of our focus group participants said,

  > *My thing is you have to give a lot of information so they can see what you're making. And what my thing is, it is like they kind of degrade you and make you feel like, kind of like less than a person.*

Our edit of that statement in the report was,

> *You have to give a lot of information so they can see what you're making. It's like they kind of degrade you and make you feel like less of a person.*

What goes into writing the final report?

Before writing the final report of your focus group findings, you should have a clear idea of your primary audience. As you plan the content and format, keep in mind what your audience will need in order to understand and be affected by your findings. Do you want to emphasize quotes from parents? Will the report contain a lengthy analysis of the policy implications of the findings and use a few quotes as illustrations? Will it contain specific policy recommendations?

If you decide your report will rely heavily on quotes from focus group participants, make sure you provide a context for their stories. Otherwise, you may risk having some readers perceive the parents' concerns as "whining" because of the sheer volume of quotes you have included under each theme. Providing enough explanation about the programs and policies being discussed will lessen this risk. (See Field Note.)

Field Note

State-level policy makers were our primary audience for the findings from our project on child care and child health insurance. We knew from advocates that state policy makers were asking for opportunities to hear directly from parents affected by the policies they were considering. Accordingly, we felt that the most effective approach for this audience was to devote the majority of text to quotes from the focus group participants. Even with this approach, however, we took care to provide background on the issues raised and programs discussed so that the parents' concerns would be understood and their statements would not be weighed in a vacuum.

Where do you find contextual information for the report?

To provide context, include demographic information about the communities where you conducted focus groups and a description of the programs and policies in your state that were the focus of your research. This is where you make use of the demographic information you have collected and the information given to you by the experts you consulted early in the project (see Chapter Three). Contextual content should be appropriate to the participants' statements so that the reader can understand the references parents make and the issues they raise. For example, if child care subsidies are a focus of your research and if the parents in some parts of your state speak about being on waiting lists, you will want to describe the eligibility guidelines for the child care subsidy program and where and why there are waiting lists.

Field Note

Our report on child care and child heath insurance included the following sections:

- **Introduction.** An executive summary explaining the purpose of the focus groups and stating our over-arching conclusions.
- **Background.** A section explaining the programs and policies in Virginia that were the subject of the focus groups and the policy issues raised by the stories we heard from parents.
- **Parents' voices.** The main body of the report, providing a brief account of the major themes and findings with a series of quotes under each. Each quote was followed by an attribution such as "a mother of two in Alexandria." When the content warranted it, the attributions gave greater detail—"a mother of two on TANF" or "a father of three without health insurance."
- **Methodology.** A section on methodology which included what our research questions were, who constituted our target population and subpopulations, where the focus groups were conducted, how many participants we had in each session, how parents were recruited and screened, and how the sessions themselves were conducted. We also outlined our procedures for protecting confidentiality.
- **Community profiles.** A section providing a demographic and economic profile of the communities in which we did the focus groups.
- **Characteristics of focus group participants.** A section providing a profile of the focus group participants using data drawn from the registration forms.

See our report, *A Little Help to Help Us Along: Child Care and Child Health Insurance for Virginia's Children of the Working Poor,* at www.familyassets.net

Once you have drafted the report, make sure others who were present at the focus groups have a chance to review and comment on it. It is also wise to have an expert in each of the programs and policies you discuss in the report read relevant sections for accuracy.

Are there other ways to package the findings of your report?

In addition to publishing a report, there are other effective presentations of the focus group findings, depending on your audience. Here are a few ideas:

- **Fact sheets.** Prepare single page fact sheets for each theme area that provide background information on the relevant programs and policies, quotes from the parents, and policy recommendations, if you are making them.
- **PowerPoint presentations.** These could be combined with audio excerpts from parents, provided you have their written consent (see section on confidentiality in Chapter Seven).
- **Video productions.** Because of confidentiality, these would not include video clips from the focus group discussions. They would include background scenes to illustrate the parents' stories, with a voiceover discussing the findings. There might be one parent willing to have their story serve as a case study for such a video. You would need to explain to the parent the risks involved in that kind of exposure and make sure they are giving you their informed consent.
- **Regional reports.** Prepare separate accounts of the focus group findings for different regions of the state. If you have conducted enough focus groups in a particular area, reporting separately on those findings might be more likely to attract the attention of policy makers from that area.
- **Hearings or forums.** Create opportunities for parents who are willing to come and tell their stories. Again, this would have to be done carefully to make sure that the parents understand any risks involved.

How do you use focus groups to design further research on a topic?

You may have planned all along to use focus groups as a first step in a broader research effort. Or, something may have emerged from the focus groups that interests you in inquiring further on a narrower topic or issue. Once you have completed an analysis of your focus group findings you can use the information to figure out what research you want to do. What additional research questions have emerged from the findings? Was an issue raised about a program or policy which you didn't anticipate or do you want to be able to bolster your focus group findings with data that allows you to say something about a broader population?

The opportunity to learn from focus groups before investing in a larger research effort is invaluable. By learning more in-depth about the experiences of low-income families, you'll know what questions to include on a survey, for example, to either test or confirm what you learned from your focus group participants.

Some researchers choose to conduct focus groups both before and after doing their survey or other "quantitative"research.** They use the initial focus groups to direct them in their quantitative research and conduct the

** Here we are referring to "quantitative" research as the statistical analysis of large data sets (collected from existing large databases or from surveys) in order to determine whether themes discovered in "qualitative" research (e.g., focus groups) reflect the experiences of larger populations.

others to collect more stories to illustrate what they learned from the surveys or to question parents further about new issues that may have surfaced from their broader research effort.

Combining the two kinds of research (qualitative and quantitative) is a powerful way to reach policy makers with credible findings based on a statistically valid sample of a larger population illustrated and explained by the rich personal stories that come out of focus groups. (See Field Note.)

Field Note

In our special needs project, we learned just how important it is to combine qualitative and quantitative research in order to gain an accurate sense of the challenges faced by low-income families with children with special needs. Data drawn from analysis of the 1996 U.S. Census Bureau Survey of Income and Program Participation, and reported during the time we were conducting our focus groups, revealed little difference between the rates of work force participation of low-income families with children with special needs and those without.*** That finding, taken by itself, might lead policy makers to believe that the system for providing child care to special needs children was working well because parents were able to work.

However, that work force participation seemed to be placing an enormous strain on the parents who participated in our focus groups; parents who told us they had no choice but to work in order to make ends meet. Because of a lack of service coordination, and a scarcity of child care programs that will take children with special needs, many parents reported losing multiple jobs, not being able to work full-time despite needing the income and/or having to work nights because no one would care for their children during the day. These focus groups will enable us to tell the stories behind the numbers and they will also help us to know the right questions to ask in our broader quantitative research surveying parents.

*** Sunhua Lee, et al. 2002. *Disabilities Among Children and Mothers in Low-income Families.* Washington, DC: Institute for Women's Policy Research.

How do you engage parents after the focus groups?

For organizations that advocate for families and children, following up with the parents who participate in focus groups makes sense, not only so parents can continue to feel that they are an important part of the process, but also to inform and strengthen the voice of the organization. **However, to avoid biasing the discussion in any way, this possibility should be mentioned to the parents only after the focus group session is over.**

Some of the ways in which advocacy organizations can engage parents in their work include: ****

- **Parent advisory groups.** Have parents participate in the governance structure of the organization so their perspectives can be considered as agendas are developed and decisions made.
- **Future community surveys.** Enlist parents to help plan community surveys on issues raised in the focus group sessions. Parents can also be trained as interviewers to conduct the survey in their neighborhoods.
- **Leadership training.** Identify and train those parents most likely to act as leaders in their communities.
- **Parent participation in government structures.** Seek opportunities for parents to serve on government advisory and governance structures.
- **Public speaking.** Provide occasions for parents to testify, address civic groups, speak to the media, and meet directly with elected officials.

**** Harriet Dichter and Nancy Sconyers. (February, 2002). *Parent Engagement in the Context of Child Advocacy Organizations.* Unpublished paper. New York, NY: Ford Foundation.

Conclusion

The purpose of this manual is to provide the impetus and guidance for advocates to begin to use focus groups as a powerful tool to better understand the concerns of low-income parents, represent those concerns more credibly with policy makers and engage more parents in advocacy work. We hope the opportunity to hear directly from parents will enhance the work advocates do to influence policy and will energize and renew their commitment toward fulfilling the mission of their organization.

Our focus group project in Virginia, conducted in collaboration with the Action Alliance for Virginia's Children and Youth, resulted in almost immediate policy changes in that state. It was inspired by a member of the Virginia General Assembly who told Suzanne Clark Johnson, Executive Director of the Action Alliance, that the only way advocates could get their message across to the members of her party was to provide opportunities for parents to come to the table and tell their stories. In response, the Action Alliance designed a strategy to make that happen, using focus groups as a first step.

That effort not only had an impact on state policy makers in Virginia but also on the Action Alliance itself. The report on the focus group findings was used by advocates to push for, among other measures, expansion of Medicaid eligibility for children in Virginia. Stories from focus group participants about the disruptions in care caused by applying different income guidelines for children of different ages prompted the General Assembly to approve a proposal to raise the Medicaid guidelines so that they were the same for all children.

After observing the pilot focus group session, Suzanne Clark Johnson said:

> *It is so different for me to hear about these issues directly from parents, on a personal level. It not only informs my work; it energizes me to work even harder to bring about reforms that will help these families and children.*

We hope you will have a similar experience when you use this manual to conduct focus groups of low-income parents in your state or community. As long as you follow the principles for sound focus group methodology described throughout this manual, the information you glean from the discussions with parents will be invaluable to you and to the policy makers you seek to educate about the needs of families and children.

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Child Care and Special Needs Children: Challenges for Low Income Families

DRAFT Work Plan - Year 1

Tasks	Persons Responsible	2001-2002											
		Oct 01	Nov 01	Dec 01	Jan 02	Feb 02	Mar 02	Apr 02	May 02	Jun 02	Jul 02	Aug 02	Sep 02
Organize partnership (months 1-3)													
Solidify and invite membership of joint state advisory committee		✓											
Research options for Advisory Committee meeting place & time		✓											
Contracts for consultants, facilitator		✓											
Planning Meeting		✓											
Determine Team Meeting schedule		✓											
Define roles and responsibilities of Advisory Committee		✓											
Introductory/Planning Meeting w/ Advisory Committee to clarify roles, present project workplan, plan project, identify possible community groups				✓									
Background Research/Preparation (months 1-7)													
Research contextual data, benefits system for ME & CT		✓	✓	✓									
Contract with transcription and translation services			✓										
Purchase NVIVO software			✓										
Attend NVIVO training			✓										
IRB application			✓										
Develop one-page project description			✓										
⊷Define role of community groups			✓										
Research/investigate methods of finding/recruiting special needs children			✓	✓	✓								
Research/investigate obtaining the cooperation of necessary agencies (dbases, lists, etc)			✓	✓	✓								
Research/investigate methods of dealing with differences/definition of special needs			✓	✓	✓								
Assign observer/recorder roles & responsibilities				✓									
Define coding system for sessions					✓								
Arrangements between facilitator/translator if necessary						✓							
Travel arrangements (hotels, rental cars, etc.)						✓		✓					
Flight arrangements for facilitator						✓		✓					
Focus Group Preparation (months 3-7)													
⊷Finalize focus group target communities				✓									

⊷=Decision point

Child Care and Special Needs Children: Challenges for Low Income Families

Tasks	Persons Responsible	2001-2002											
		Oct 01	Nov 01	Dec 01	Jan 02	Feb 02	Mar 02	Apr 02	May 02	Jun 02	Jul 02	Aug 02	Sep 02
⊷Schedule period for focus groups in each state				✓									
Contact suggested community groups for assistance				✓									
⊷Determine schedule of check-in calls, community group conference calls for questions				✓									
Develop protocol/probes for research questions				✓	✓	✓							
Develop site criteria					✓	✓							
CT Advisory Meeting					✓								
Select/Contact possible sites in each state						✓		✓					
Develop recruitment materials					✓	✓							
Set schedule for recruiting for each state					✓	✓							
Translate recruitment materials if necessary					✓	✓		✓					
Ideas from community groups concerning recruitment strategies					✓	✓							
Finalize recruitment strategies for communities in CT						✓							
ME Advisory Meeting						✓							
Finalize recruitment strategies for communities in ME								✓					
Find/create/obtain outreach materials for sessions						✓		✓					
Develop screening instruments					✓	✓							
⊷Determine number of participants to invite						✓							
CT Focus groups and interviews (months 5-9)													
Train community groups on methodology						✓							
Arrange for child care, transportation, refreshments, toys, etc. w/community groups, sites						✓							
Hire necessary translator/s for facil/notetaking/observing						✓							
Translator for screening calls						✓							
Begin recruiting - CT						✓	✓						
Take screening calls - CT						✓	✓						
Contact potential participants -CT							✓						
Select and invite participants - CT							✓						
Determine/arrange child care/transportation needs -CT							✓						
Conduct pilot focus group							✓						
Meet/conference call with advisory com. to discuss pilot focus group							✓						

⊷**=Decision point**

Child Care and Special Needs Children: Challenges for Low Income Families

Tasks	Persons Responsible	2001-2002											
		Oct 01	Nov 01	Dec 01	Jan 02	Feb 02	Mar 02	Apr 02	May 02	Jun 02	Jul 02	Aug 02	Sep 02
Conduct 7 focus groups in CT							✓	✓					
Choose participants for in-depth interviews								✓					
Arrangements for interviews								✓					
Toys or books for children (instead of stipends)								✓					
Conduct In-depth interviews with selected parents for case studies in CT								✓	✓				
Transcription of CT sessions, interviews							✓	✓	✓	✓			
Translation of CT sessions and interviews if necessary							✓	✓	✓	✓			
ME Focus groups and interviews (months 7-11)													
Train community groups on methodology								✓					
Hire necessary translator/s for facil/notetaking/observing								✓					
Hire translator for screening calls								✓					
Arrange for child care, transportation, refreshments, toys, etc. w/community groups, sites								✓					
Begin recruiting - ME									✓	✓			
Take screening calls - ME									✓	✓			
Contact potential participants -ME										✓			
Select and invite participants - ME										✓			
Determine/arrange child care/transportation needs -ME										✓			
Conduct 8 focus groups in ME										✓			
Choose participants for in-depth interviews										✓			
Arrangements for interviews										✓	✓		
Toys or books for children (instead of stipends)										✓			
Conduct In-depth interviews with selected parents for case studies in ME										✓	✓		
Transcription of ME sessions, interviews									✓	✓	✓	✓	
Translation of ME sessions and interviews (?) if necessary									✓	✓	✓	✓	
Analysis (months 9-12)													
Analysis of findings										✓	✓	✓	✓
Meet with advisory com. to discuss/clarify findings													✓
Report on focus group findings and case studies													✓

⊷=**Decision point**

Questions for Community Group Co-Sponsors

We are interested in your insight and advice concerning the following issues:

- What are the appropriate sub populations to reach? (race, ethnicity, etc.)
- What are the best sites for focus group sessions?
- What are the best days and times for focus groups for low-income working and non-working parents in your communities?
- What are the best sources and methods for recruitment in your community?
- Do you know of anyone who can help with the circulation of recruitment materials?
- Do you know of anyone who can help us find child care provider volunteers?
- Is transportation necessary to pick up parents in your community and if so, is there a van or service you can suggest?
- We offer a stipend for parents to attend focus groups. What level of stipend is needed to attract parents in your community?
- Would you like to provide outreach materials from your organization at the focus group sessions?

Thank you for your help in recruiting families for the Childcare and Children with Special Needs Project

Through these focus groups, we hope to give parents a voice in informing policy decisions regarding TANF requirements, child care, and special needs issues.

Focus Groups in Manchester:

We will be inviting low-income parents/guardians/foster parents to attend focus groups to talk about their children with special needs and experiences finding and using child care. We offer a $50 stipend, arrange for on-site child care, and provide food.

- The focus group will be held in Manchester in late May or early June

Who is eligible to attend the focus groups?

Parents/Guardians/Foster Parents can be working or non-working. They are eligible if:

- They have a child who is six or younger with a special need
- Their family income is less than $32,900 per year/ $2740 per month

How is the project defining "special needs"?

"Children with special needs" is defined broadly for our project. We'd like to talk with families with mild, or perhaps undiagnosed special needs as well as more severe physical, mental, or behavioral problems. Examples could include:

- *Physical disabilities* like blindness, deafness, paralysis
- *chronic illness* such as asthma, sickle cell anemia, cerebral palsy, diabetes
- *A need for ongoing medical procedures* like daily medication, intubation, cathertization
- *Mental disabilities or behavioral problems* such as autism, developmental delays, learning problems, ADD or ADHD, seizures, hyperactivity, behavior problems

What do families need to do to participate?

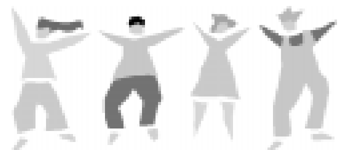
Parents/Guardians will be screened by project team members here at the University of Southern Maine to ensure they meet criteria for participation. Our research design and all forms have been approved by our University's Institutional Review Board to insure that we have stringent procedures for preserving confidentiality and obtaining informed consent.

- To participate, families should call…... They will get a voicemail message asking them to leave a phone number where they can be reached and times that are best to reach them.
- We try to call families back within 24 hours. We are happy to call families back evenings or weekends if they request this.

You are welcome to call ……… and speak with ………… for more information. Again, thank you for your help!

We Need Parents and Guardians to Talk About

Children with Special Needs and Day Care



in the Presque Isle Area!

- Do you have a child 6 years old or younger?
- Do you think or know that this child has a disability, behavioral problem or chronic health condition?
- Does your family earn less than $32,900 per year or $2,740 per month?

If you are selected to participate in one of our discussion sessions to be held this summer, you will receive $25.
Child care and refreshments will be provided.

PLEASE CALL TOLL-FREE ……..
to see if you can participate!

A project of the University of Southern Maine,
sponsored in your community by **……..**

RECRUITMENT IDEAS

This is by no means a complete list of all the places where you might recruit low-income parents. Sources will also depend very much on the subject of your inquiry and the population and subpopulations you have identified. However, these are the ideas which came out of the discussions we had with community groups and with our advisory committee and may prove helpful as you begin developing your own recruitment strategies.

Community Action Agencies
WIC offices
Hospitals, clinics
Community health centers
Home Visiting Agencies
TANF agency, job training agencies, subcontractors
Laundromats
Grocery stores
Hair salons
Fast food locations
Public housing
DV shelters
Soup kitchens/food pantries
Homeless shelters
Adult education programs
ESL classes
Migrant education programs
Public Health Nurses
Churches
Good Will/Salvation Army Stores
Walmart/ other discount stores
Pediatrician’s Offices
Family practices
Public Access channels
Radio stations (including Spanish and other language stations)
Neighborhood newspapers (Including Spanish and other languages)
Public schools
Child care providers (licensed centers, subsidized child care centers, family child care homes, Head Start, School Readiness Programs, kith and kin providers)
Family Resource Centers
Resource and Referral Agencies
Legal Services Offices
Community Centers
Libraries
Parent support groups
Bus lines
Pharmacies

Particularly for rural areas:
Country stores
Grange halls
Town clerk’s office

Some ideas for publicizing your focus groups through these sources include:

- Posting flyers and posters;
- Talking to people in waiting rooms;
- Sending flyers with letters of endorsement from agencies to their clientele;
- Placing announcements in local newspapers or on radio stations;
- Making phone calls to client lists provided you by organizations;
- Sending flyers home with children from elementary schools, Head Start, School Readiness Programs, etc. or handing them out to parents when they pick up their child;
- Attending community events, going to playgrounds, parks, spring fairs, etc. and passing out flyers
- Making presentations before agency staff and parent groups

Screener Name: ________________________________

Date: ________________

Name of Potential Participant: ____________________________________

Special Needs Children Screening Instrument

Hi, I'm ____________ and I'm calling from the Muskie School of Public Service in Portland, Maine. We are an organization that does research to improve services for children and families. You answered our flyer (*or however you got their name*).

> ***Pause for verification.*** *If respondent draws a blank, ask: Is there someone in your household who might have contacted us? Can we speak with that person? If person indicated they can't talk now: "Is there a better time we could call? (Make an appointment).*

> ***Once connected with the right person:***

We are organizing small groups around the state for parents to talk about their experiences finding day care for children with special needs or chronic illnesses.

We are interested in finding out about your experiences so that we can try and improve day care services for children with special needs or chronic illnesses. The information we gather will be completely confidential. Your name and your child's name will not be used or associated with the information you provide.

Do you have any questions about the study? (*answer questions)*

In order for me to select and put together these groups of parents, I need to find out some details about your family. If you don't feel comfortable answering a question, it's fine to say so. Is it OK for me to ask some questions about your family?

> ***If they say no,*** *thank them for their time.* ***If they say yes,*** *thank them and ask them the questions below.*

1.) Do you have a child with special needs or a chronic illness? Yes / No

- *If no, explain that that's who we're looking for and thank them for their time.*
- *If yes, continue.*

2.) Is that child 6 years old or younger?

(*If respondent has more than one child with special needs* <u>*age 6 or under*</u>*- determine which one has the most severe special need and ask questions about that child)*

- ❑ Yes, how old? ____________ (Boy / Girl)
- ❑ No

- *If no, explain that that's who we're looking for and thank them for their time.*
- *If yes, continue.*

3.) How many people in your family (or household)? __________

4.) Is your total family income less than: *(**NOTE:** These are choices for how to ask the question depending on the easiest way for them to answer the question.)*

$17 per hour (if 2 earners, combined hourly wage); or
$685 weekly; or
$2,740 monthly; or
$32,900 annually

❑ Yes
❑ No

- *If no, explain that that's who we're looking for and thank them for their time.*
- *If yes, continue.*

5.) Has your child received a diagnosis? If so, what is it?

6.) How would you describe your child's special need or chronic illness? (Ex. Developmental delays, how does it affect child care…)

7.) Is English your everyday language? (*if no):* How well would you say you spoke English? (*Can explain that we may be conducting some groups or interviews in other languages.)*

❑ Very Well
❑ Well
❑ Fair… What language do you usually speak? ___________________
❑ Not very well… What language do you usually speak? _______________

8. What town or city do you live in? (*please make note of town, county & state)*

__________________________________ How long have you lived there? ____ yrs

9. Do you or anyone else in your household work outside the home?
   - ❑ Yes
   - ❑ No

   If yes,
   - ❑ Full-time?
   - ❑ Part-time?

   If no, have you or anyone else in your household worked outside the home in the last two years?
   - ❑ Yes
   - ❑ No

10. Is your child with special needs in care outside of your home during the day or night?
    - ❑ Yes
    - ❑ No

    If no, has that child been in care outside the home in the last two years?
    - ❑ Yes
    - ❑ No

11. Are you receiving TANF or cash assistance benefits?
    - ❑ Yes
    - ❑ No

    If no, have you received them in the past two years?
    - ❑ Yes
    - ❑ No

12. Are you receiving SSI (Social Security) for your child with special needs?
    - ❑ Yes
    - ❑ No

    If no, have you received it in the past two years?
    - ❑ Yes
    - ❑ No

Tell them about the stipend and explain that child care will be provided at the meetings.

If you are selected to participate, would you need child care?
- ❑ Yes
- ❑ No

  If yes, for how many children? __________

What ages? ___________________________

Please tell us about any special arrangements we need to make for your child with special needs. ____

____
(if the special needs are not something we can accommodate, offer to reimburse them for child care in their home)

How did you hear about this project? (see a flyer, Head Start) ____________________

Are you available on: ______________________

Would an evening focus group work for you? ___________________________

If you're not sure whether you want to invite them to participate, tell them you'll call them back and ask them their:

Name:

Phone Number:

Best time to reach you?

*(**NOTE:** If they don't have a phone ask them if there is a number of a friend, neighbor or family member who you could call who could get in touch with them.)*

***If you're not sure whether you will include the person**, thank them and tell them you will call them.*

***If you have decided to invite the person**, give them the date, time and site location and tell them that you will give them a reminder call.*

Thank them for their time!!!!

Parents of Children with Special Needs Focus Group Project Description

The Edmund S. Muskie School of Public Service at the University of Southern Maine wants to find out about the issues of finding and keeping child care for children with special needs. As part of this research project, we will hold meetings called “focus groups” in your community to bring together parents and guardians of special needs children and talk about their experiences with child care. The purpose of these focus group meetings is to learn:

- About finding and keeping child care and balancing work and family when you have a child with special needs or chronic health conditions
- How these experiences with child care affect families with children with special needs or chronic health conditions.

We will collect information about what is working and what is not working about child care for children with special needs and/or chronic health issues in your area. This information will hopefully help to improve access to child care for children with special needs. The federal Child Care Bureau is paying for this project.

The focus group will last for approximately two hours. A trained facilitator will conduct the focus group. A staff member from the University of Southern Maine will take notes and another will observe. The focus group will include between eight and eleven other people. Only first names will be used in the focus group discussion.

If you have any questions about this research, you should contact …

University of Southern Maine Muskie School of Public Service

Informed Consent for Participation as a Subject in a Research Study

Child Care and Children with Special Needs

You are being asked to be in a research study about child care for children with special needs. **We ask that you read this form and ask any questions that you may have before agreeing to be in this study.**

Purpose of the Study

I understand that the purpose of this study is to find out about the experiences of parents in finding child care for their children with special needs. By listening to other parents I may learn about services I didn't know about that might be available to my family. However, the main purpose of this study is to use the information from these discussions with parents to help bring about changes in programs so that families like mine can get more help.

Description of Study Procedures

If you agree to be in this study, we will ask you to fill out a registration form that asks questions about you and your family and to participate in a discussion group with other parents. This process will last about two hours. The discussion will be tape recorded and notes will be taken about what is said during the discussion.

Payments

I understand that I will receive $50 for participating in this focus group.

Voluntary Participation

I am voluntarily participating in this discussion. I know I may feel uncomfortable talking about some things about my family but I know I don't have to say anything I don't want to. I also understand that if I feel too uncomfortable to continue participating, I am free to leave the group at any time, without penalty or loss of the stipend.

Confidentiality

I understand that anything I say in this discussion, or any information I provide on the registration form, will be kept confidential. My name will not be shared with any person, agency or organization not connected with this project. Only first names will be used in the group discussion. Because this focus group is confidential, I agree to keep private anything anyone else says here today. All records and tapes will be kept in a locked file and will be destroyed at the end of the project. While there is always a risk of some people outside of the group hearing what is said in the discussion, I know that the research staff will do everything possible to keep all of the information I provide completely confidential.

Contacts and Questions

For more information concerning this research you may contact ………at…………..

Statement of Consent

I have read (or have had read to me) this form. I have had an opportunity to ask questions and have had my questions answered. I understand that I will receive a copy of this consent form. I give my consent to participate in this focus group.

____

Print Name

____ _______________

Signature Date

STRONG FOUNDATIONS FOCUS GROUP PROJECT
ASSURANCE OF CONFIDENTIALITY

I,____, am associated with the Strong Foundations Focus Group Project and promise to keep the names and any identifying information about the participants in this discussion completely confidential. All papers containing names or other identifying information will be kept under lock and key and will not be shared with any persons, agencies or organizations not associated with this project. Any reporting of the findings of this discussion will be done without names, and no information will be included which would reveal the identity of the participants without the written permission of the participant.

____

Print Name Signature Date

STRONG FOUNDATIONS FOCUS GROUPS
REGISTRATION FORM

Name: ____

Address: ____

Phone # ___________________________

Age: _______

What are the first names and ages of your children?

Name **Age**

____

____

____

____

____

Do you work outside the home? Yes ☐ No ☐

If yes, do you work full-time or part-time? Full-time ☐ Part-time ☐

How many are in your household? _______________

About how much income does your family have? *(Fill in any of the following)*

An hour_______________ a week ________________

A month_______________ a year___________________

Are any of your children in day care while you work or go to school?

Yes ☐ No ☐

If yes, please check the types of care you have for your children.

Type of Care	Child One	Child Two	Child Three
Family Day Care home	☐	☐	☐
Day Care Center	☐	☐	☐
Head Start	☐	☐	☐
Family member, neighbor or friend in their home	☐	☐	☐
Nursery School/ Preschool	☐	☐	☐
After School Program	☐	☐	☐
Other (Please Specify)	☐	☐	☐

What is the total amount of money that you spend for day care for your children? (Fill in either of the following.)

Weekly _____________ Monthly _____________

Did you know that some working parents can get help to pay for certain types of day care? Yes ☐ No ☐

Are you getting help from any program in paying for day care? Yes ☐ No ☐

Do you have health insurance for any of your children? Yes ☐ No ☐

Have you heard about a child health insurance program for those who don't qualify for Medicaid called CMSIP (pronounced "simsip")? Yes ☐ No ☐

If yes, are your children on CMSIP? Yes ☐ No ☐ Don't Know ☐
Are your children on Medicaid? Yes ☐ No ☐ Don't Know ☐

Would you like a copy of the report about these meetings sent to you? Yes ☐ No ☐

Thank you for your time!

Focus Group Protocol

- Introductions

- Thanks for coming

- My name is…………..

- The Action Alliance for Virginia's Children and Youth and a group of local community organizations are arranging these meetings. We're doing these discussions around the state because we want to hear directly from parents about their experiences with getting health insurance and day care for their children.

- Confidentiality….. only interested in finding out about your experiences so that we can push for changes that will help parents like yourself.

- The Muskie School at the University of Southern Maine will be writing report. Offer to send copy

- Tape recording

- One way mirror

- …will be taking notes, …will be observing.
    - researchers from the University of Southern Maine.

We'll spend most of our time talking about day care, then health insurance.

Define what we mean by day care,

Care by someone else while you work or go to school: Includes:
- Friend, relative or neighbor either in your home or in theirs
- Day care centers
- Head Start
- Family Day Care Homes
- Nursery Schools or Preschools
- After school programs

1.) Who here has a child who is taken care of by someone else while you work?
    - Did anyone help you find the care? Who was that? Tell me more.
    - What are some of the things that led you to make your choice of day care?

2.) Have you had to change your children's care?
- Think about the last year. How many times have you had to change your children's care?
- What were some of the reasons?

3.) Are the care arrangements you've chosen for your children meeting your needs?
Listen for:
Cost
Transportation problems
Reliability of provider
Hours to match work hours
Length of day door-to-door

4.) Is the child care you have chosen for your children meeting their needs?

5.) Did you know that there is help for some parents in paying for certain types of day care ? Have you heard about that?
- How/when did you hear about it?
- Who have you heard it's for?
- Have you ever tried to get that help? What were your experiences with that?
- If you could get that help, would you be interested?
- If more of the cost of your day care was paid for through a program to assist parents would that change things for you? If so, how?

6.) In thinking about where your kids are now, what things that your children are getting do you like? Is there anything you'd like to change?

7.) What do you want most for your children while in day care?

Now let's spend the rest of the time talking about health insurance for your kids.

1.) Have you ever heard of Medicaid? How about the child health insurance program, CMSIP?
- How/when did you hear of Medicaid? of CMSIP??
- Who have you heard these programs are for? *(Make sure they answer for both programs)*

2.) Have any of you tried to get this help? Can you tell me about your experiences?

3.) For those of you who haven't tried to enroll your kids, can you give me some reasons why you haven't?

If there was a single thing you could change to make it easier for parents to get help with health insurance and day care for their kids what would it be? (GET SPECIFICS)

NOTE: For the child health insurance and child care subsidy questions listen for:

Location/hours of office
Confusion about filling out the form
Paperwork/documentation requirements
Treatment by workers
Lack of follow up
Not eligible
Eligibility requirements such as child support cooperation
Language barriers
Legal status
Stigma/ don’t want a “handout”
Inconvenience
Bad rap or misconceptions about eligibility on the street
Don’t need it