

5. ELCAA: Community Focus Groups: Step by Step

Holding a focus group isn't rocket science. However, it does take careful thought and planning. A successful focus group nets useful information, and is a good experience for participants, leaving them with a positive perception of the library.

Steps to success:

Decide how many focus groups are needed.

First, identify the different community subgroups you want to reach. Possibilities are:

Two parent families	Groups based on economic levels
Lesbian or gay parents	Groups based on educational levels
Teenage mothers and/or fathers	Pre-K teachers, nursery or daycare staff
Single mothers or single fathers	Faith based leaders
Grandparents raising their grandchildren	Leaders – of communities, companies, politicians,
Members of an ethnic or cultural group	Owners/managers of businesses selling children's
Residents of a specific neighborhood	goods
Children with special needs	

Determine whether to have heterogeneous (recommended) or homogeneous groups.

A heterogeneous (not alike) group provides a broader reach with fewer focus groups. Homogeneous (all alike) groups offer the opportunity for a deeper reach, as group members will generally feel less intimidated and thus may share more.

Determine length of session, then determine questions.

Realistically, a maximum of six questions can be answered in a 40 minute session by five people. If you have more participants or more questions, figure on more time.

Choose participants.

Between six and twelve people for each group is ample. Remember that your potential participants are responsible for young children. With this group, offering child care is key to getting participation. Also have space for strollers, coats, diaper bags, etc. If you have more participants, allow for more time.

Invite participants.

Consider giving participants an incentive to join a focus group. You might ask local businesses to donate coupons or gift certificates to give away, or you might purchase gift certificates or goods, budget permitting. If your library has board or other pre-K materials which have been donated, consider those as give-aways. Try to get a broad spectrum of participants, not just your storytime regulars. Do ask some familiar patrons, but also ask community partners to help you identify potential participants. Folks who are not regular library users, will give you a different perspective. Use your library's social media to advertise for participants.

The facilitator.

The facilitator's job is to run the focus group. Ideally, the facilitator should be a neutral person, and someone the participants do not know. Also ideal is that the facilitator have experience running focus groups, or at least skills in chairing meetings, controlling discussion and knowing techniques to ensure active and engaged participation.

Determine a method for capturing comments. Recording a focus group is an option, though it may dampen discussion. If the discussion is not recorded, another person should take notes using general

descriptors (teen mother of 2). Notes can also help capture nonverbal behaviors that emphasize particular points.

Another option is to have the second person note highlights on a whiteboard or flipchart. This allows for discussing, grouping, and prioritizing of topics. It's important that a second person do the recording, the facilitator must give full attention to 'reading' participants: facial expressions when they speak or don't speak, signs of boredom, etc. For flip charts, in advance, label pages with each question.

Set the stage.

Hold the focus group in a private space. You may want participants to sit around a table. Consider having things on the table for people to fiddle with: pipe cleaners, rubber bands, Playdoh, etc. Another option is open circle seating, where everyone can see one another. Consider giving out pencils and 3x5 notepads for private thoughts to be jotted down. Have a sign-in sheet so you can send thank you notes after the session. Have information about the library on display for people to look at before the session or take home as they leave.

Provide drinks and snacks. Make participants feel welcome. Have them make stick-on name tags for their first name so you can call on them by name during the session.

At least thirty minutes' prior to the start, set up room and make sure handouts, supplies, and incentives are available and ready. No need to assign seating; let participants seat themselves.

Running the focus group.

When it's time to begin, the facilitator will:

- Establish immediate rapport with group members. Greet them with a smile.
- Welcome participants and introduce yourself.
- Explain why the library has gathered them to seek their opinions.
- Explain the process and put participants at ease. Explain what a focus group is if you're using that term. Otherwise just note that something like, "We're grateful that you'll let us have this brainstorming session to help us improve library services." Provide the context by explaining that the library is working to improve its services to families with young children, and how valuable their input will be.
- Explain that what they say is confidential, and how you will be capturing their comments.
- Clarify any terms (being careful to avoid using library jargon).
- Let participants know that their responses are neither right nor wrong, and that it is fine to agree or disagree with others' responses. Explain that you'll ask questions but if discussion starts to ramble, you'll pull them back to the topic.
- If it is a heterogeneous group, ask participants to introduce themselves and the kind of position/connection that they have relative to pre-K children. Alternately, pair them up and ask them to interview each other in one minute each, and then introduce their partner to the whole group. The facilitator has to call time each minute. This exercise, which also serves as an ice breaker, takes four minutes per pair.

During the focus group.

- The facilitator will ask the questions, clarifying and drawing out quiet group members as needed.
- The facilitator and any note taker must care, and demonstrate that they caring about comments and discussions. Disinterest or faked interest is obvious to participants, and shuts down sharing. The facilitator should demonstrate that caring verbally ("uh-huh;" "I get it") and nonverbally (focusing on the person speaking, nodding).
- The facilitator and any assistants must set aside their own experiences so that they can actively hear the participants' experiences and thoughts.

Concluding the session. The facilitator will begin wrap up by summarizing and clarifying what participants said. If you're using a whiteboard or flip chart, you can use them highlight the results of what was said.

- The facilitator will make a significant closing statement, thanking participants for their time and assuring them that their statements will be kept confidential. Any assistants representing the library should also add their thanks.
- Tell participants again what you'll do with the information – help redesign space, services, etc.) - how they will benefit
- Give out incentives if available. Give participants library contact info or give out business cards in case they think of anything after they leave.

Immediately following the focus group.

Facilitator and any assistants write “field notes,” summarizing the discussion. Because we can forget important details so easily, writing these notes immediately after a session has ended is best practice. As soon as possible, transcribe and augment and flip chart notes.

Analyzing results.

To extract useful information from focus group data, follow these steps:

1. Compile answers to each question from all interviews
2. Organize and classify answers into categories (Example: to a question asking what would motivate them to bring their children to the library, the answers might fall into categories such as “More programming” or “More family-friendly policies”)
3. Look for trends. Did all participants from two-parent households observe A, while single parents observed B?
4. Look for agreement. Did the majority of participants agree that C was an important service the library lacked?
5. Capture innovative ideas. These may be in the form of brief throwaway comments, so careful note-taking is essential.

Follow up.

Send participants personal thank you notes - hand written is best. Enclose a business card. A note shows your awareness of the value of their time. It will build loyalty to the library, and strengthen their sense of ownership of the library as a community organization.