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Periscope protocol for focus groups for adults and kindergarten children



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2008

Focus group methodology

Protocol for the Focus Groups on Nutrition and Physical Activity

The focus groups (FG) are a “carefully planned series of discussions designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment” (Krueger and Casey, 2000). The aim of the FG is to raise a discussion among the participants that makes the research to see a certain phenomenon from the participants’ perspective.

In Periscope the Focus Group Methodology (FGM) will be used as a supplement to the quantitative methods in order to obtaining background information on health behavior in the institutions as well as in the family. In addition it will be used to explain and understand findings obtained from quantitative methods and it will be used to generate new ideas and identify solutions to barriers and constrains for healthy behavior in 3-6 year old children.

This protocol provides the same framework to each of the three countries participants.

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Guidelines for the focus group organization in each of the three participating countries

Purposes of the focus groups interviews

Determine factors that favor or restrain 3-6 years old children's healthy dietary behaviors and adequate levels of physical activity habits from the child, the family, the pedagogues and other stakeholders perspective.

Sampling and recruitment

The focus groups should be conducted in the area where the preventive intervention is planned. In focus group research, as routine a number of minimum 4 participants is required for a group, and 12 is the upper limit; in PERISCOPE an average number of 6-8 participants to facilitate open discussion shall compose adults FG.

- To the focus group shall participate parents, pedagogues, kindergarten's managers and if possible; kitchen staff / food catering companies, pediatricians, architects, psychologists, and municipal officers.
- A special focus group shall be held with children 5-6 year old to get insight into their own ideas about the determinants of a healthy nutrition and a proper level of physical activity, but overall to discuss how should a kindergarten be enjoyable for them and to facilitate positive health behaviors.

In each of the focus groups the participants will be accurately chosen according gender, education, and social level in order to get the highest level of comfort and freedom to speak.

Parents' focus groups:

Parents from low SES should if possible participate in a different group from parents with high SES, because to people of similar social and cultural backgrounds may be easier talking to each other. The number of invited participants should be from 10 to 12 because it can happen that some of the invited ones can't come at the very last moment. The groups could be held in a school room, with chairs but not desk, during the afternoon or the early evening, according the country's school system schedule and the working hours and should last 2 hours. A minimum of two groups (one of low SES parents and another one of medium-high SES parents) will be held, since perception of favoring factors and barriers to a healthy life style can be different between the two groups.

Pedagogues' focus groups:

Pedagogues of both sexes actively teaching in kindergarten. The group should be composed of 6-8 people; since pedagogues are often already at school and the group should be held in the afternoon at the end of the school day, it should not be necessary to invite a higher number of people to replace the missing, event quite unlikely to happen. It is advisable to invite pedagogues of different ages. The group could be held in a school or in a health system room and should last two hours. One focus group could be sufficient.

Other relevant stakeholders:

Pediatricians, architects, psychologists, physical education teachers, municipality officers, food catering companies. It is difficult to organize focus groups with these experts. If a focus group is not possible to be held, it can be substituted with personal interviews. In this case at least 8 personal interviews for each different group of expertise are needed. A personal

interview will follow the same list of questions as the focus group, allowing 5 minutes to answer to each question. Any convenient hour for the interviewed person is fine.

Children's focus group:

This group will require a special care since experience on focus groups in this age range is poor. Children should be divided by sex, so at least two groups are needed one composed of girls and another one composed by boys, because attitude on physical activity is different between boys and girls even at this age. The number should be as low as possible to get a positive discussion environment without too much crowded. It is suggested a number of 4-5 children for group. It could be necessary to organize two groups for each sex, because children can become shy during the session or either one of them being too active and discourage the others to participate and express their opinions. Whether it is convenient to have children already friends among them or not is still matter of debate. At such a young age children coming from the same class could be advantaged because they would not go through the feeling of shyness as it could happens in a group of children never met before the meeting. On the other hand, having children who do not know each others could avoid the risk of peer pressure in the group setting. Even though the meeting place for the FG should be a neutral one and not related to the topic to be examined, nor to the participants, it would be advisable to organize children's FG in the school environment. This would limit troubles related to parents' and school's authorities permission to move children out from their daily environment. The groups should be held during the school time and should not last for longer than 45 minutes or one hour because children get bored of the session much easier and earlier than adults.

How to contact the participants

Focus groups members should be contacted preferable two weeks before the fixed date. Parents, pedagogues and children to invite can be contacted through kindergartens' list. The choice of the participants does not need to be randomized, but can be done through a convenient sample, according the characteristics above reported.

Parents potentially participants can be contacted directly at the school when they bring or take back their children or by a letter delivered by the teacher at school. Both in the first verbal contact or in the first letter a general explanation of the focus group's aim and structure should be given, such as the general purpose and topics of the discussion, the time and location of the meeting, and the method used to record their responses. A couple of days should be offered to the parents to decide whether participate or not.

The involvement of the school through the pedagogues in contacting the parents is a key step to get a higher number of positive answers of participation and to confirm the importance of the project to the parents. The invited people should be temporary registered in a book, including their address and their phone number as well as other data necessary to identify them in terms of the category to which have been assigned and the focus group to which they should participate.

To the people that express their willing to participate, a confirmation and thanks letter should be sent one week before the actual meeting, still delivered by the teacher. To be sure of their participation it would be advisable to make a follow-up phone call the day before the meeting.

Providing a small incentive for each of the participants might make the recruitment easier in some countries. According to the country legal rules and tradition the incentive can be a small amount of money or a little flower bunch or plant, or even a participation certification signed by the national scientific coordinator.

Location and setting

The meeting could be held in a place known trusted by the participants such as kindergarten. It is essential that the focus group take place in a room that is sufficiently comfortable, not too big, because this could interfere with a positive atmosphere and reduce the quality of the tape recording. Chairs should be organized in such a way to ensure that all participants can be seated facing each other in a circle. It is suggested no to use any tables or one central table or desk to set a more informal atmosphere. All participants should be able to establish eye contact with the moderator and each other. Make sure that the sessions is not interrupted by cellular phone calls or other people coming in the room.

Participants parents should be given contact details of the focus group responsible so they can inform on time in case they could not be not able to attend the meeting.

Since eating and drinking together, in many cultures, tends to promote conversations and communication within the group, healthy snacks and light refreshments could be offered to the participants and placed on a table to one side of the room so that these can be enjoyed at the beginning of the focus group, while they are meeting each others.

Taping Equipment

The FG discussion needs to be recorded because a written transcription of the whole discussion is needed to perform a content analysis of the conversations that take place during the focus groups sessions. Using an audio taping device only could less interfere with the development of a friendly and relaxed atmosphere during the focus group, essential to make the participants feel free to say whatever they think. However, using a video tape allows to keep an objective and continuous record of non verbal language of all the group. Whatever device will be chosen it is recommended to test them under similar circumstances as the sessions itself (e.g. room size, maximum distance to speaker, background noise,...), and, possibly, to use 2 devices, in order to have a backup.

Ethical approval

It is the coordinator's duty obtaining the ethical approval if in the country it is needed to conduct focus group interviews.

The coordinator should make sure that ethical approvals are received before focus group interviews are conducted.

Guidelines for the moderator

What is a focus group?

A focus group is a group discussion that gathers together people from similar background or experiences to discuss a specific topic. A focus group is guided by a moderator, who introduces topics for discussion and helps the group to participate in a lively and natural discussion. A focus group is NOT a group interview where a moderator asks the group questions and participants individually provide answers. The moderator role is to guide the discussion and listen to what's said but not to participate, share views, engage in discussions or shape the view of the outcome. Focus groups have sometimes been useless because moderators could not hold back their personal opinions. The interest has to be shown by smiling, eye contacts and carefully listening.

Preparation of the focus group sessions

The task of the moderator is to facilitate the discussion of the participants. This requires certain skills. Moderators who have had no previous experience in guiding focus group discussions with younger children and adults are strongly encouraged to try out the approach before, using a group that is not selected for the study.

The moderator should read relevant literature, so that when the discussion becomes irrelevant for the theme of the focus of the research, the discussion must be refocused to the subject under investigation. The moderator should also be completely familiar with the questioning route. An understanding of all questions is needed because the sequence of questions may be modified during the discussions. It is recommended for the same moderator to conduct a maximum of 2 focus groups per day. While the discussion is running, ask yourself the following questions:

What else do I need to ask to understand this respondent's statement?

Am I hearing everything I need to know to understand the problem and develop the intervention?

How much time do I have left, will I be able to cover everything (when just one section of the topic guide could take the full 2 hours)?

Performing the focus groups

One expert person (moderator) should lead the focus group sessions with the help of another person (co-moderator). The co-moderator should help the moderator mainly by monitoring recording equipment, taking notes of nonverbal reactions of participants such as head nodding or confirming smiles and other body language signals. In addition the co-moderator has to quietly suggest to the moderator eventually missed questions, without participating to the discussion, and, last, taking care of the practical arrangement of the room.

At the end of the FG moderator and co-moderator should write the debrief describing the members of the focus group, how many participants were there, what was the group's composition and any notable circumstances that influence the discussions. Discuss perception of critical points and notable quotes. Writing these notes just at the end of the session is very important because allows to point out immediate reactions following the focus group that can be forgotten after a few hours and that can be helpful in the FG analysis. The debriefing should record too.

Introduction of the focus group session

Each focus group session should start with a brief introduction to put the participants at ease and make them ready and comfortable to engage in the behavior.

The introduction should consist of a welcome word, an overview of the topic, summarizing the ground rules and starting with the first question.

- Introduce moderator and co-moderator.
- State for what purpose the results of the focus groups will be used for and why participants were selected.
- Participants should be reassured that there are no wrong answers or contributions. It must be clear that the aim of the discussion is to find out about the different opinions and views which exist among each of the groups: e.g. You don't need to agree with others, but must listen respectfully as others share their views
- It must be explained that the role of the moderator is to learn from the participants, and that he or she will ask follow up questions to get a complete understanding of the things that will be said.
- Participants can comment on each others statements and ask questions to each other.
- It should be mentioned that research results will be anonymous. Name tags are only there for use during the sessions.
- The use of taping equipment should be explained.
- Participants must be asked to speak loud and clear enough to be picked up by the microphone and they should also be urged not to speak at the same time.
- The moderator first turn off his/her cellular phone and kindly ask the other participants to do the same.

To start the discussion and to achieve some general background knowledge on the participants and their daily lives it is useful to ask some very general warming up questions, like how many children they have and their age.

Questions for the focus group interview

For each of the groups a questioning route addressing the most important information needed should be prepared and written on a paper, in order to do not forget and miss any of them.

Leading the focus group sessions

It is very important to create a warm and friendly environment. It is important that participants are in no way inhibited to say what they think or feel on the subject. The style of the moderator is therefore of major importance. An attitude pose of incomplete understanding but not ignorance is recommended. You should give the participants the feeling that they are helping the moderator to get an in depth view on the topics discussed. Moderators' respect for participants is one of the most influential factors affecting the quality of focus group results. The moderator must truly believe that participants have valuable wisdom, no matter what their level of education, experience or background. It is furthermore important to create an atmosphere of sharing among the participants, so that one or two people don't dominate the discussion. Make sure you use the right formulation for the questions. Open ended questions like questions that start with what do you think about?, where do you get new information, what do you like the best about...should be used, while dichotomous questions that only need a yes or no answer should be avoided.

Be comfortable with pauses. Use pauses to ask questions like: would you explain further?, would

you give an example? Or I don't understand. A 5'-second pause after participant's comments or questions, may result in additional points of view. Do not talk too much and do not move too quickly from one topic to another. A pause may occur after a question, if no one answers the question, look from one participant to another to see if someone might attempt to answer. If there is no response, just repeat the question. You can just say: "take a moment and think about the answers, we'll wait until you are ready to respond". Or if someone said something and there is no reaction: "How do others feel about this?"

Other phrases that may help you to lead the discussions are:

Would you explain further?

Could you give me an example of what you mean?

Is there anything else?

Tell me more about that

Who else has something?

I see people nodding their heads, tell me about it.

Is there someone with a different view?

Closing the focus group sessions

Offer an oral summary of the discussion. This summary has several advantages. It occurs close in time to when comments were actually made. More important, however, is that this process allows and encourages participants to verify that the summary is accurate and complete. When giving the oral summary, keep it short (2-3 minutes) and limit yourself to the most important points. Ask the participants if you have missed anything? The summary can also be done by the co-moderator.

At the end of the focus group session, all participants should fill in a short written questionnaire to be able to evaluate the sample procedure. Items such as age, gender, income, and family affluent scale. You can also get this information when participants enter the room. Organize a registration table, where they fill out the registration questionnaire.

As soon as the focus group is concluded, the moderator team should take steps to ensure the integrity of the data. One task is to get the participants to leave. Participants may come to you and give additional information. In some cases they wait until others have left the room, to do so. Take careful notes of this additional information.

Debriefing

Check the recording equipment by rewinding and playing the tape at different points. If problems are apparent, reconstruct the discussion using field notes. Then start with the debriefing, by discussing the following questions:

What are the most important themes or ideas discussed?

Which themes need to be included in the written report?

How did these differ from what was it expected?

How did these differ from what occurred in earlier focus groups?

What points-quotes should be included in the report?

Where there any unexpected findings?

Should we do anything differently for the next focus group?

When participant leave write down your impressions. These notes may be helpful for the later interpretation of the sessions. Draw a diagram of seating arrangements. Write down the number of participants. Compare and contrast the focus group to the other focus groups. Label tapes and notes.

Data analyses

Transcription of the discussion

Make a back-up copy of tapes. Analyze the data of each focus group within hours after it ended, try to finish each transcript before conducting the next focus group. You may catch things that you didn't notice while moderating and this may help you with the following focus group interviews. One focus group interview requires on average 10-16 hours to get full transcripts. In the transcripts, instances must be marked where a new or different speaker starts a comment. The use of names or individual identifications is not necessary. Comments should not be edited nor removed. When finishing transcripts summarize how many people talked about the topic and how many people were supportive and unsupportive. When there is a shift in opinion, trace the flow of the conversation for clues that might explain the change. The challenge for the moderator is to identify these inconsistencies while the participants are still in the group. Inquire them about the differing points of view: Earlier you said... and now you've indicated that... These seem to me to be different from each other, could you help me understand how you feel about this issue. Write down the shift and the reason for it.

Data analysis and interpretation

The real product of most focus groups is a final report, and it can take a considerable amount of analyses to convert the original conversations into a usable report. During analysis ask yourself:

Was this topic something that came up in most of the groups?

When it did come up, were some participants more interested than others?

For people who were interested, just how important was this topic.

What do I want in the report? Select information that might be important for developing the interventions.

The final report should not be a collection of *transcripts*. The final report consists of the *description* of the raw data, this is a summary of the participants' comments in the stencils provided in the questioning route. Thus while the raw data include all responses, the descriptive style seeks to simplify the tasks of the reader by presenting themes and providing a few typical or illuminating quotes.

The next step after describing the data is *interpreting* the data. Start from the descriptive statements and suggest what these findings mean. Based on the interpretations, *recommendations* should be formulated. Recommendations for the intervention go beyond interpretation, placing attention on various view regarding future sources of action. The final report should only include the final two steps of interpretation and recommendation.

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Appendix 1: Questionnaires for demographic factors_ Parents

PARENTS

Date: ../../....

This questionnaire is to get some general information about the participants in the group discussion

The questionnaire is anonymous

Thank you very much for your participation!

1. How old are you? year

2. How tall are you? cm

3. How much do you weigh? kg

4. Gender? Men

Women

5. What is your nationality?

Other EU country

Other non-EU country

Where do you live? Give city + suburb + street

.....

How many children do you have? children

Give the name and address of your child's school

.....

What is your highest diploma?

None

primary school

junior high school

high school

university

9. What kind of job do you do?

Appendix 2: Questionnaires for demographic factors_ Teachers

TEACHERS

Date: ../../....

This questionnaire is to get some general information about the participants in the group discussion

The questionnaire is anonymous

Thank you very much for your participation!

1. How old are you? years

2. How tall are you? cm

3. How much do you weigh? kg

4. Gender? Men

Women

5. What is your nationality?

Other EU country

Other non-EU country

Where do you live? Give city + suburb + street

.....

How many children do you have? children

In what school do you teach? Give name + address

.....

How many children do you have in your class? children

11. For how many years do you work as a teacher? years