

# Tips for Conducting Interviews and Focus Groups

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**Don't be afraid of a little silence.** The primary role of an interview or a focus group moderator is to be a good listener and to ask the right questions. Avoid the temptation to talk too much. Sometimes silence just means people are thinking. After a question, you should pause and look at your audience with a look that conveys that you are eager to hear what they have to say in response to the question.

**Follow up on questions that might have more than one answer.** Many of the questions you ask may have more than one answer. For example, many questions are in the form of what works well about what you are doing or what works better or what unmet needs exist. Usually a person will mention something and then describe the issue. After they are done, you usually want to ask something like, "Is there anything else?" or "Are there other unmet needs?"

**Use probes if respondents are only partially answering the question.** Sometimes you ask a question about early childhood services in general and people focus only on child care. If one person does this, other people may follow their lead. Probes are designed to be used when you want to make sure some issues are addressed. You don't always use them, only when those issues haven't been addressed.

**Ask people to elaborate.** When respondents say things that are interesting or that partially answer the questions you are trying to address in the community assessment, ask them for more details so you have more information to work with. Probing questions such as, "Can you tell me more about that?" or "How does that work?" are very useful.

**Ask people to explain things.** Sometimes we feel like we should know everything. That is impossible, especially when we are working in a broad area like early childhood. If somebody says something that you don't understand or don't fully understand, you should ask them for more detail. For example, you can say, "Can you explain that?" If they use an acronym and you don't know what it means you can ask them what it is. For example, "What is ASQ?" If you do this once or twice, your respondent will be more likely to start making his or her answers easier to understand.

**Don't express strong opinions or get into debates.** Everyone has strong opinions on topics, but an interview or focus group is not a good place to bring them up. You want people to feel free to share their experiences and what they are thinking, and if they think you are going to judge them or you have already made up your mind on something, they might be reluctant to do that.

**If they ask you what you found so far, you might not want to tell them too much.** People are interested in finding out what you are hearing from others and you probably wouldn't mind sharing. You may, however, want to limit what you share because you really want to spend your time finding out about their experiences, and the coalition's assessment findings will change as you collect more information, think about it, and discuss it among coalition members. It is probably best to limit what you say and be somewhat noncommittal by noting that people are saying different things and you and the coalition and leadership council are going to need some time to figure out what it all means.

**Say thank you and follow up.** It is always important to thank people for the information they provide. If they are someone who you want to get further involved in SB, saying thank you and then following up with an email or phone call can be very useful. If someone asks for something like a summary of SB or a contact number for someone you know, try and get it to them as soon as possible.