



FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL FOR UNDERSTANDING COMMUNITY NEEDS

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Focus Group Protocol for Understanding ECE Needs Within the Community

Tool Description

This flexible protocol is intended to be a model for agencies hoping to conduct focus groups with families, providers, and partners around ECE needs within the community. Focus group findings, paired with administrative data, can help elucidate gaps in understanding preschool preferences and barriers to access, which can help inform decision-making around preschool supply and demand.

- The focus group protocol can be found starting on page 2.
 - Specific questions for ECE providers; Family, Friend, and Neighbor providers; and community leaders and advocacy groups can be found starting on page 5.
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Facilitator Instructions

Your efforts to cultivate a positive atmosphere for the group can foster a productive and rewarding discussion that is rich in data. Ideally, participants will express a wide range of perspectives and some points of disagreement, controversy, or debate rather than consensus. Of course, participants may all agree on a given issue, but you should encourage participation of all those in attendance to make certain that this is the case. You are responsible for creating a thoughtful atmosphere and setting the tone of the discussion. You will participate very little, except to ask probing questions, keep the group on topic, and move the discussion of the group along.

Examples of probing questions include:

- I'm not sure I understand ____, can you say more?
- I want to make sure I understand. I am hearing you say ____, is that correct?
- Can you say more about that?
- You mentioned ____, can you elaborate?
- What did that experience look like for you?
- How did that affect your work/experience/decision-making?
- Can you give an example of that?
- What made that particularly challenging or successful?



Waiting time can feel uncomfortable, and that's okay. Give everyone an opportunity to respond by pausing for 10–15 seconds. If no one responds, rephrase the question, or ask participants if anything is unclear.

Below are some facilitation pointers you may find helpful.

Ways to foster a relaxed atmosphere	Ways to encourage respectful participation
• Be friendly and welcoming. • Smile and maintain appropriate eye contact. • Speak in a calm, pleasant tone of voice. • Use relaxed and attentive body language. • Incorporate humor where appropriate and natural. • Be patient and do not rush participants to respond. • Show genuine interest in participants' perspectives. • Acknowledge sensitive topics thoughtfully.	• Set ground rules at the beginning of the time together. • Use pauses and probes. • Encourage participants to discuss the questions with each other. • Link ideas together when appropriate. • Encourage participation from everyone. • Do not judge comments (e.g., "excellent"). • Do not inform or educate <i>during</i> the group.

Introduction

Thank you for joining us today. We're here to better understand the most pressing early childhood education (ECE) needs and barriers facing families and providers in accessing quality care for children ages 0–4. Your input will help inform how our agency responds to these needs. This focus group will last approximately [REDACTED] minutes. We'll begin with brief introductions and an engagement activity, followed by discussion questions. Please feel free to ask questions at any time.

Before we begin:

- Do you consent to participate in this focus group?
- Do you consent to audio recording to support accurate note-taking? *(If no to recording: we will take written notes only.)*

Participation is voluntary. You may skip any question or stop at any time. Responses will remain confidential and reported without names. The only exceptions are if you share information about harm to yourself or others, child abuse/neglect, or if disclosure is legally required.

As a thank you, you will receive a \$[XX] e-gift card.

To support a productive discussion, please:



- Silence or minimize use of electronics.
- Listen respectfully and allow others to share.
- Stay focused on the topic while sharing your perspective.

A facilitator will guide the discussion and keep time, and a note-taker will document key points.

Before we begin, let's take some time to get to know one another by introducing ourselves and responding to the following prompt: **[Insert an ice breaker prompt of your choice]**

Now we will go around, introduce ourselves, and answer the engagement question. I will go first and choose the next person, and so on... **[Let all participants respond]**

Next, we will get started with our focus group questions.

Protocol and Notetaking Template

Question	Notes
Section 1: Needs and Barriers When Accessing Quality ECE for 4-year-old Children	
<i>First, we would like to ask about the most pressing needs and barriers in accessing quality ECE for 4-year-old children in your community.</i>	
(See sample questions on the next page, separated by focus group attendee type.)	
Section 2: Needs and Barriers When Accessing Quality ECE for Children Ages 0–3	
<i>Next, we would like to ask about the most pressing needs and barriers in accessing quality ECE for children ages 0–3.</i>	
(See sample questions on the next page, separated by focus group attendee type.)	
Section 3: Additional Input	



At this time, is there anything else that you'd like to share?

(Additional input or additional questions)

Next Steps

Thank you for sharing your experiences—your input is extremely valuable. Going forward, we will summarize findings across groups and share a report. If you would like to receive a summary of findings, please provide an email address that we can use to send findings when they are available. As a reminder, you will receive your \$[XX] e-gift card within approximately [timeline] as a thank you for your participation.

Are there any final questions?

Thank you again for your time.



Sample Qualitative Questions for Focus Groups, Separated by Focus Group Attendee Type

Focus Groups with ECE Providers

Needs and Barriers When Accessing Quality ECE for 4-year-old Children

- From your perspective, what are the key ECE needs for 4-year-olds in your community?
- What is enabling/empowering you to meet those needs?
- What agencies or programs are currently supporting or empowering you to meet the needs of your community?
- What is preventing you from meeting your community's needs (e.g., lack of space, inability to hire or retain teachers, inability to find qualified substitute teachers, challenges from regulatory requirements, inability to charge for full cost of care)?
- What would most enable you meet these remaining needs and how can our agency best help?

Needs and Barriers When Accessing Quality ECE for Children Ages 0–3

- From your perspective, describe the key needs of families in your community for **ages 0–3**, including needs related to children's kindergarten readiness.
- What is different about serving infants and toddlers up to age 3 and serving children age 4?
- What factors prevent you from serving more infants and toddlers?
- If our agency were to offer additional support to providers—focused on expanding access for children ages 0–3—where should the agency prioritize or focus its resources? What would help providers the most in expanding care for ages 0–3?

Focus Groups with Family, Friend, and Neighbor Providers

- What barriers do families face in ensuring their children receive high quality care?
- Do the barriers differ at all in terms of meeting needs for infants and toddlers? (0–3)?
- Are there barriers specific to helping ensure children are ready for kindergarten (e.g., serving students with special needs, focus on children's academic skills, focus on children's emotional & behavioral needs)?
- What are the biggest barriers that you as providers encounter in helping families meet their ECE needs (e.g., lack of demand, costs, professional training, age-appropriate materials, or space)?



- Are you interested in becoming a licensed provider and, if yes, what is preventing you from becoming licensed? What barriers have you encountered?
- What programs or supports, if any, are you using now to help meet the needs of families in your community?
- What new or additional support would be most helpful to you?

Focus Groups with ECE Community Leaders and Advocacy Groups

Needs and Barriers When Accessing Quality ECE for 4-year-old Children

- From your perspective, what are the key ECE needs for 4-year-olds in your community?
 - Do these needs differ at all by region or neighborhood?
 - Are some needs specific to certain provider types (e.g., center-based providers; family, friend, and neighbor providers)?
- What supports are currently available to providers to meet those needs?
- What agencies or programs currently support providers to meet the needs of your community?
- What is preventing providers from meeting your community's needs (e.g., lack of space, inability to hire or retain teachers, inability to find qualified substitute teachers, challenges from regulatory requirements, inability to charge for full cost of care)?
- What would most enable/help providers to address the unmet needs and how can our agency best help?
- What would your top priorities be to help meet those needs?

Needs and Barriers When Accessing Quality ECE for Children Ages 0–3

- From your perspective, what are the key needs of families in your community for ages 0–3, including needs related to children's kindergarten readiness?
- What is different about serving infants and toddlers up to age 3 and serving children age 4? What are the primary factors preventing providers in your community from serving more infants and toddlers?
- If our agency were to offer additional support to providers—focused on expanding access for children ages 0–3—where should we prioritize or focus its resources? What would help providers the most in expanding care for ages 0–3?
- What do you think are the biggest challenges/barriers to expansion in supporting children 0–3?

