

# A TOOLKIT TO SUPPORT THE BOTNAR CHILD ROAD SAFETY CHALLENGE

## TOOL 3 FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

**BOTNAR**  
Child Road Safety Challenge



The Global Road Safety Partnership is hosted by:



 The George Institute  
for Global Health

WHO Collaborating Centre for  
Injury Prevention and Trauma Care



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## What is a focus group?

A focus group is a group interview conducted by a trained facilitator (moderator). It is a form of qualitative research, where discussion and interaction between group members is encouraged. Although participants individually answer the moderator's questions, they are encouraged to talk and interact with each other. Responses from one participant can stimulate ideas in other members of the group. This technique is built on the notion that the group interaction encourages respondents to explore and clarify individual and shared perspectives.

## Why is a focus group useful?

A focus group allows you to obtain detailed information about the ideas and opinions of group members about a particular topic, for example road safety in a community and to explore a range of views in more depth than a survey would elicit, where opinions may be shared or may differ. Ideas can be developed about possible solutions and interventions that could be feasible and acceptable to the wider community. Focus groups allow you to explore more open-ended questions, for example asking children about their journey to school, exploring whether they think it is safe or not safe and what could be done to make the journey safer. Focus groups can often be used together with KAP surveys and in-depth interviews, in a mixed methods approach.

## What are the advantages and limitations of focus groups?

ADVANTAGES (+)	LIMITATIONS (-)
More detailed information can be collected compared with other methods such as surveys	Needs a skilled moderator to conduct the interview
Able to collect information about views and opinions	Individual responses may be influenced by the group – may give socially acceptable responses
Interaction between group members may generate new ideas	Takes time and resources to organise and run groups, transcribe the findings and analyse the results.
Can interview a number of people at once	Only suitable for relatively small numbers, compared with KAP surveys
Able to collect useful quotes which illustrate the topic in people's own words	Harder to coordinate than individual in-depth interviews

## When can a focus group be conducted?

Focus groups are suitable to be used at *all* stages of a project.

In the **early stages**, a focus group can explore the nature of the problem (e.g. RTIs occurring to children on roads near a school), or views about the speed of traffic, wearing of seat belts or cycle helmets.

In the **development stage**, once an intervention has been identified, focus groups can contribute to the design of the intervention (e.g. an intervention for volunteers to supervise children crossing a busy roads near their school.)

In the **evaluation stage** of the intervention, focus groups can help to identify facilitators (what helps) or barriers (what hinders) the intervention taking place as designed.

## How to conduct a focus group

### ▷ Step 1: Articulate the purpose of the focus group

It is important to think about what the main aim of the focus group is - who the target group is and to consider what broad topics will be explored in the group discussion. (e.g. *aim*: to explore views about safety on the journey home from school; *target group*: children aged 11-13 years; *broad topics*: what I like and dislike about the school journey, what would improve the journey).

## ▷ Step 2: Identify the resources you will need

A focus group is more than a general discussion about an issue and therefore needs to be conducted by a moderator, who is experienced in asking open-ended questions and in probing different topics. The moderator needs some strategies to tackle heated debate in the group (e.g. summarise the arguments from both sides and suggest the focus group moves onto another major theme.) The moderator needs to move the conversation along from topic to topic and involve all participants in the group, including the quieter members of the group, without bringing in their own values into the discussion. It is often useful to have a second assistant moderator who can record the group discussion and take notes of the proceedings whilst allowing the main moderator to concentrate on the flow of the conversations.

The following resources will be needed to run a focus group?

- Written guidelines and question plan prepared before the focus group
- A suitably trained moderator and assistant moderator to conduct the focus group
- A moderator/ other researcher to transcribe the recorded group interview
- If necessary, a trained statistician to analyse and assist in the presentation of the findings
- Recording equipment
- A suitable room or meeting space. This needs to be quiet so that recordings of the discussion can be made. It needs to be easily accessible to the focus group members and to be a place in which they feel comfortable to contribute.
- Travel (transportation to sites, per diems for staff)
- Dissemination costs
- Miscellaneous (facility hire for training)

## ▷ Step 3: Identify your study population

In relation to child road safety, the survey population may be children themselves, talking about their own experiences of using the road environment near their school; the parents/ carers of these children; teachers; other school staff e.g. teaching assistants, school dinner helpers, school crossing patrollers and community stakeholders.

Each group needs to be composed of similar people who see themselves as equals, so that they are all willing to express their views freely (e.g. the mothers/carers of children aged 9-10 years (Grade 5) children; teachers from 3 or 4 schools (though perhaps not the head teachers). Groups should not be composed of a mix of people, for example children, their teachers and road safety engineers. This may prevent the children from expressing their opinions because they feel that the others in the groups have more expertise or that they might get into trouble for stating their concerns about the school environment.

The ideal size of a focus group should be between 5-10 people. If the group is too large, some individuals may not have a chance to contribute to the discussion. If the group is too small the interaction between group members may be restricted. One of the moderator's roles is to try to encourage and include shy participants in the discussion and restrict the more vocal participants, so that one or two individuals do not dominate the discussion.

## ▷ Step 4: Decide on whether you need ethical approval

Focus group participants will be contacted beforehand and invited to join the group in order to talk about a particular issue, for example parents to discuss their children's school journey and safety of roads in the area in which they live. Participants need to be reassured that their responses will be anonymous and any findings reported, including direct quotes will not include names and that they will not be able to be identified. They need to complete a consent form to take part.

### ▷ Step 5: Decide on how many focus groups need to be conducted

Focus group discussions are aimed at eliciting a richer understanding of a topic of interest – it is quality of information not quantity that matters. The number of focus groups held will depend on whether you need to gather information from differing demographic groups e.g. children, teachers, parents. Consider whether it would be more appropriate to have groups comprised solely of males or females or whether a mixed group may be more useful. More than 10-12 focus groups will result in too much time being taken in both the actual discussion and the subsequent analysis without the benefit of much more new information being gathered.

Each focus group may take from 60 – 90 minutes for adult participants and slightly less for child participants given the shorter attention spans (45 – 60 minutes). It is important to bear in mind that analysis of qualitative data also takes a significant amount of time and needs to be taken into consideration when allocating time towards each stage.



**For example:**  
A project on improving the road safety of children near the school premises, 5-10 focus groups may be conducted: this could include 2 focus groups of boys and 2 of girls, 3 focus groups of teachers, 3 groups of parents (mothers, fathers and a mixed group).

### ▷ Step 6: Design a plan for the focus group

Careful planning is essential for a successful focus group to be conducted. You need to be clear about the purpose of the focus group and to write a statement setting out the aims, for example, 'to explore children's views about their school journeys and to consider how their journeys could be improved and made safer and more enjoyable'. A question plan is needed for the focus group ( see section 11), how the focus group will be conducted ( see section 12) and how the results will be analysed (see section 13).

### ▷ Step 7: Develop a series of questions for the group

Questions need to be carefully worded and ordered so that they cover all the ideas/ topics identified in the aims of the study. The questions can be divided into key themes. Themes can be defined as broad grouping of ideas or views. These may be derived from a search of the literature or may emerge from initial discussion and brain storming of members of the project.



**An example of a study identifying barriers and facilitators of walking and biking to school is presented in the Annex. Three themes were identified: Parent and Child factors, characteristics of the physical environment and school attributes. In this study 12 focus groups made up of 4th and 5th grade students and their parents were carried out in central North Carolina, U.S.. The purpose of the focus groups was to inform the development of an intervention to increase active travel to school.**

Each of the major themes can then be explored in more depth, providing minor themes. The moderator needs to be able to explore certain themes in more depth by asking probing questions such as "can you tell me more about this?" or 'can you give me an example?' Follow-up questions can then provide more detailed responses: 'Why do you think this is the case?' The moderator can then explore whether focus group members have similar views or whether they have different opinions. Exploring difference is important. The moderator's expertise will be to listen carefully to the comments of the group members and to carefully direct the discussion and conversation so that it flows from one key theme to another without injecting bias into the discussion.

The order in which the questions are asked is also important, so that the focus group flows well. It may be helpful for the moderator to break the ice by asking some general fewer sensitive questions to start with and then moving on to more sensitive topics. Piloting of the questions is important so that questions flow well and to see whether the questions are understood by the potential target group.

### ▷ Step 8: Identify and train your team

Potential participants need to know beforehand the purpose of the focus group e.g. mothers/ carers of grade 7 and 8 students: road safety and their children.

At the start of the focus group, the moderator welcomes the participants, thanks them for attending, reviews the purpose of the overall project, introduces the moderator and assistant moderator, provides an overview of the focus group, the ground rules for the meeting and asks participants to briefly introduce themselves. Participants will be informed that the discussion will be taped, and notes made during the meeting but will be assured that

any quotations used will remain anonymous and that individual names will not be identified. They will be asked to sign a consent form and told that they could leave the discussion at any time. The first few moments of a focus group discussion are crucial as the moderator needs to create a thoughtful, permissive atmosphere, provide the ground rules and set the tone of the discussion.

The recommended pattern for introducing the group discussion includes:

- (1) Welcome
- (2) Overview of the topic
- (3) Ground rules
- (4) First question



**Here is an example of a typical introduction:**

**“Good afternoon and welcome to our session. Thank you for taking the time to join us and talk about your journey to and from school. My name is \_\_\_\_\_ and assisting me is \_\_\_\_\_. We are both with the [Name of Institution]. We are working on a large project which focuses on trying to improve the safety of roads in and around schools in [CITY] in [COUNTRY]. As part of this project we want to talk to those who use the roads to get to and from school every day – to gain their perspectives on what the issues may or may not be and to ask you what you think would be good to look at in terms of road safety in this area. We are having discussions like this with some other schools in the area too.**

**You have been invited to participate because you represent the population that we are trying to help and improve the roads for. There are no wrong answers in this discussion – we want to hear all the differing viewpoints from you. Please feel free to share your thoughts even if it differs from what others have said. We are interested in negative comments AND positive comments – at times it is the negative comments that are the most helpful. We want to keep this a very informal session – there is not right or wrong time to discuss something – please do not hold back from commenting.**

**There is a microphone here which we use to tape record the session because we don’t want to miss any of your comments. We won’t be using any names in our reports – you can be assured of complete confidentiality. The report that we write will be fed back to our project teams to help us develop potential solutions to improving road safety in this area.”**

After the introductory session, the moderator will introduce the first of the key areas to be covered (there will possibly be 6 to 10 broad areas). Each of the key areas will be explored in more depth with probing questions.

When all the themes have been discussed, the moderator will ask whether there are any other issues that have not been raised up until then. At the end of the focus group discussion, the moderator will summarise the key themes, signal those areas where there has been agreement and area where there have been a variety of views and then briefly discuss how the focus group recordings will be transcribed and analysed and the results summarised. Confidentiality of the information will be emphasised.

As explained in section (5) above a trained moderator who is skilled in conducting focus groups on health and lifestyle issues will need to be recruited. The assistant moderator will need previous experience in note taking and in focus group procedures. However both the moderator and their assistant may not be familiar with issues related to child road safety, so training on road safety may be required. Collaborative working with a local university department or NGO may facilitate this process.

The moderator may need to pilot the focus group question plan with a small number of individuals (potential Focus Group members) to become familiar with the questions and feel comfortable with the wording and ordering of the questions.

## ▷ Step 9: Collect, analyse, interpret and report on your results

An analysis plan is important. It should be structured around the main questions posed in the discussion (the question plan used by the moderator is a useful starting point). These then become the major themes that form the basis of the analysis. (See example below, based on Ahlport et al 2008).

The process of analysing the transcripts of recorded focus groups needs the input of a trained researcher with experience in qualitative studies. Time must be allowed for the transcription of the recorded focus group discussions: each focus group may take 90 – 120 minutes to be transcribed. Ideally 2 individuals would transcribe the information and a final version derived. Analysis can be done using a software package such as NVivo, but if the data set is relatively small or if expertise in using such software is absent, it is possible to use only manual methods. A software package and manual methods can also be used in combination.

The steps used in a manual analysis plan can illustrate the process of the analysis. (This is similar to the manual analysis plan for in-depth interviews, but as a number of people's responses and discussions need to be traced, the discussion may be less focused).

- The transcripts of the focus groups need to be read through several times by the moderator and assistant moderator to get an overall 'feel' of their contents.
- A number of major themes need to be identified.
- Within the major themes different arguments or strands can be identified. Areas where the focus group members mainly agree and disagree need to be identified.
- Particular quotes may be identified which illustrate the arguments. (This may be easier for focus groups compared with in-depth interviews because it will not be possible to attribute the quote to an individual – quotes can be labelled Focus group 1, Participant 4).

A report of the focus groups may include some quantitative data about the number of people and the number of groups involved but the emphasis will be on the qualitative information obtained. The report could contain the following sections:

- The purpose of the focus group
- The number of focus groups conducted, the number of participants in each focus group, background information about the participants (male/ female, age group etc.), where the focus group was conducted.
- The major themes that emerged. Quotes selected to illustrate key themes. Quotes can be labelled Focus group 1, Participant 4.
- A summary of what the findings show?
- What else has been learned from the process?
- What have the focus group contributed to the study and how the findings can be used?

When you have collected the information and analysed the data from the focus groups, you need to think about sharing and disseminating the results. A section on: How can I disseminate the findings of KAP Surveys, Focus Groups and In-Depth Interviews can be found in the Introduction to the Toolkit.

## References

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## **ANNEX 2.1.**

### **FOCUS GROUP INVITATION LETTER: CHILDREN AND ROADS**

Dear.....

Thank you for being willing to take part in our focus group. We would like to hear your views and opinions about 'Children and roads in your community'. We are collecting this information to help us to make the roads safer for your children when they travel to school and around your community.

You will be a group of 6-9 other parents/carers of schoolchildren aged 9-10 years. The group interview will be led by a researcher and the discussion of the group will be tape recorded. The opinions and ideas of your group will be summarised and some of your own words may be used in a short report, but this will be anonymous, your name will not be included.

The date, time and place of the focus group is given below:

**DATE: Wednesday, 4th December**

**TIME: 6.00pm**

**PLACE: Southlands Community School, East Road – follow signs to Focus Group at main entrance.**

We look forward to seeing you at this time.

Yours sincerely,

Safe Schools Initiative.



## ANNEX 2.2. SAMPLE CONSENT FORM TO PARTICIPATE IN FOCUS GROUP: CHILDREN AND ROADS

You have been asked to take part in a Focus Group sponsored by the Safer Roads Initiative. The purpose of the Focus Group is to discuss views of parents/ carers in your community. The information learnt in the focus group will help us to understand how to make the roads safer for your children when they travel to school and around your community.

You can choose whether you take part or not in the Focus Group and you can stop at any time. Although the focus group will be tape-recorded, your words will remain anonymous and no names will be mentioned in the report.

There are no right or wrong answers. We would like to hear views from you and everyone in the group. We hope you will be happy to give your views even if it may not always be in agreement with others in the group. We ask that all responses are kept confidential and that you respect the responses of all people taking part.

Can you please sign below?

I understand this information and agree to participate fully in the focus group

<b>Signed:</b>	<b>Print Name:</b>	<b>Date:</b>



## ANNEX 2.3. EXAMPLE OF A STUDY USING FOCUS GROUPS OF PARENTS AND CHILDREN TO IDENTIFY BARRIERS AND FACILITATORS OF WALKING AND BIKING TO SCHOOL AND TO SUGGEST WHICH INTERVENTIONS

(Summarised from: Ahlport K N et al (2008). Barriers to and Facilitators of Walking and Bicycling to school formative results of the non-motorized Travel Survey. Health Education and Behavior. Vol 35(2):221-244.)

**Question:** What are the barriers to and facilitators of walking and biking to school?

**Setting:** 4 Elementary schools in North Carolina, USA.

**Sample population:** 37 parents and 37 children.

**Focus Groups:** 12 focus groups, separate groups run for parents and children. 6 parent groups and 6 children's groups. Parents' Focus Groups average time: 90 minutes, Children's Focus groups: average time 60 minutes.

**Focus group guides:** guides developed for parents' groups and children's groups.

### RESULTS

**Major themes:** Three groupings of themes identified

- Parent and Child Factors
- **Characteristics of the Physical Environment**
- School attributes

Sub-themes: Examples of the minor themes related to Characteristics of the Physical Environment: 'Barriers that discourage active travel'

- Lack of sidewalks
- Weather
- Distance from school
- Terrain
- Traffic
- Obstacles in the road that prevent clear vision
- Dark mornings at certain times of year
- Lack of bicycling support in school and community (e.g. Bicycle stands, helmet storage)

### Sample Quotes from Parents' and Children's Focus Groups

**/// For me it would definitely be some sort of sidewalk or extremely wide streets, some safe areas for the child to walk or bikes. .... otherwise they are just sitting ducks**

(Parent)

**/// If you go on the road there's way too much traffic. You're constantly being passed by cars. I am afraid that one of those times you're going to swerve right into the road and get hit.**

(Child cyclist)

### Recommendation for an Intervention:

Multiple levels of influence on active travel decision identified – suggesting that multi- level strategies are needed.

# Global Road Safety Partnership



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