Safe Childbirth Checklist Collaboration

Tips for running a
Focus Group Discussion
Overview

This document provides practical tips for running a focus group discussion, to gather perceptions and experiences of health-care staff about the use of the WHO Safe Childbirth Checklist.

Focus group discussions are form of a qualitative research in which a group of people share their perceptions, opinions, beliefs and attitudes towards a particular issue in a group context. The perceptions and opinions of the individuals in the group stimulate reactions in the other group members. The flow of ideas around a semi-structured process facilitates a collective dialogue and helps build an understanding of the issues being studied.

Focus groups are particularly well suited to reflect on the perceptions around use of the Safe Childbirth Checklist, as well as the barriers and success factors of its implementation, as experienced by the Collaboration pilot sites. The technique is straightforward and effective.

This document is an aide-memoire for those interested in running this exercise. For those willing to learn more about how to practice this technique we recommend referring to the scientific material referenced at the end of this text.

In the following pages, you will find some of the key features of the focus group methodology adapted for the purpose of the Safe Childbirth Checklist. The content is structured into three parts: preparing the focus groups, running the focus groups, and after the focus group is concluded.

Appendices at the end complement what has been summarized within the text. These provide practical examples for running a focus group discussion. We recommend to those interested in running a Focus Group based in this template, to read this entire document and become familiar with its main features before going to the final appendices.
1. Preparing a focus group

**Identifying the conductor & objectives**

The first step is to identify the “Conductor” of the focus group. The conductor is the person responsible for running the exercise and transcribing the results of the discussion. Ideally, this person should have experience in running discussions of this sort. Importantly, the conductor needs to become familiar with the Safe Childbirth Checklist project, understand its objectives, the processes and methodologies that have been put in place, as well as the main issues that are likely to arise during the discussion so she or he can quickly understand what is being said by the participants, and also be able to prompt or ask questions that are relevant to the particular discussion.

The conductor, alongside other relevant project leaders, need to establish the objectives of the focus group; i.e. to better understand the success factors and barriers to use of the Checklist. To become acquainted with the project, the conductor needs to read the project materials that are available, and also discuss the project with a few key informants, either the project leads, or some of the leading project participants, to identify the main issues that should be covered in the discussion. Throughout this initial preparation, the conductor should write 6 to 10 questions to use as a guide for the discussion on the day – examples are provided in Appendix 3.

**Selecting and inviting participants**

Selected participants need to be directly using the Checklist. Depending on the specific angle of the focus group discussion, the characteristics of the participants may vary depending on the issue being tackled.

One of the essential conditions for a rich and informative discussion is that participants bring diversity of viewpoints and of experiences to the group. The group should involve different types of professionals with different skills to help facilitate different viewpoints and trigger discussions. If possible, all types of health-care providers involved in using the Safe Childbirth Checklist should be represented in the group.

The group should also reflect a wide range of levels, mix of professions and working patterns (e.g. day shift and night shift). However, the most important thing is for people to feel comfortable and able to express themselves as openly and freely as possible, therefore there should be no hierarchies in the group. Some participants may feel uncomfortable speaking openly with others, particularly senior members of their team. In this case, it would be advisable to conduct separate meetings.

The number of participants is not fixed. What is essential is that all participants have time and space to speak. The larger the groups are, the more difficult it is for everyone to participate. The smaller the groups are, the more limited the number of ideas and discussions. Usually, the number of participants tends to range between 5 and 15 to find a balance between ideas and space for everyone’s participation. If there are many candidates, it is always possible to run more focus-groups.

When participants are selected, they shall be invited to join the group through the method that is appropriate in each particular context (i.e. by e-mail, formal letter, by phone, in person, and so on).
Candidates should be free to accept or reject participation. Those who accept should do it based on their willingness to honestly contribute to the discussion by sharing their true opinions and perceptions. It will be important to check if the candidates have accepted to join the group. In case of refusal, it will be necessary to find additional participants if the numbers are fewer than 5.

**Determining venue and time**

- Find an inviting place to hold the meeting, such as a classroom or meeting room. It should be a friendly setting. Ensure participants know where and when the meeting will take place, and how long it will last. At this point, the organizer can communicate the objective and the wider purpose of the meeting.
- Start time
- Duration (approximately 2-3 hours)
- Main objectives of the focus group, e.g. “To gather your experiences with use of the WHO Safe Childbirth Checklist in our facility”, “to identify the main barriers to its effective use”, etc..

One or two days prior to the meeting, we recommend sending a reminder, including the date, place and agenda of the meeting.

**Preparing materials**

Consider bringing materials to the meeting that may facilitate the discussion i.e., copies of the Checklist itself. It may also be helpful to provide participants with paper and pens so they can take notes if wished.

The conductor or an assistant must take notes during the meeting. It is essential that the note-taker writes the participants’ comments as actually said, without interpretation. The ideal method to gather all participant’s comments and thoughts is by recording the meeting. Any method can be used (video or audio-recorder). The conductor, however, must obtain permission to do so and explain that it is for research purpose. Only if participants accept this, should the conductor tape the discussions.

**Confidentiality**

Participants must be free to express themselves provide honest opinion, even when they differ from the predominant views of the project leads, or of the majority of their colleagues. Therefore, they should be clearly informed in advance that their contributions will remain confidential, and that they will be known, in an anonymized way, to the researchers only. The conductor will make sure that the transcript of the meeting does not lead to identifying any particular contributor. Likewise, all participants must agree to maintain confidentiality.
2. On the day

Setting up the venue
The conductor must arrive early to the venue. He or she needs to ensure that each participant will be sitting comfortably and that each individual can be seen and heard by everyone.

Timing
The meeting should last about two or three hours, with possible breaks in-between, thus if needed, a break area should be contemplated. The conductor needs to monitor the duration of the meeting and the timing of the breaks, if needed.

Introduction
At the beginning of the meeting the conductor should introduce the focus group and explain its purpose. It may be helpful to:

- have all participants introduce themselves;
- thank all participants for volunteering their time;
- summarize the main purpose of the meeting;
- express the usefulness and validity of all participant’s opinions;
- make it clear to all participants that they should feel free to express their points of views, and experiences regarding the Checklist implementation, and the main difficulties or barriers to its effective use;
- explain that all contributions will be confidential, that means that neither the conductor, nor any of the participants should speak about what will be discussed during the focus group.

The conductor may ask for permission to record the conversation, insisting that the recording will be used for transcription purposes only, and that the identity of participants will not be associated with any single viewpoint.

The conductor should also explain that he or she will use some questions to guide the meeting and cover all the main points required, and that participants may raise additional issues at the end of the meeting. The conductor should also clarify that there are no right or wrong answers, and that each opinion is appreciated and valued. Everybody can express their opinions about the questions and everybody should speak in turn.

Demographic information should be collected for all participants - an example of such a questionnaire is given in Appendix 2. This questionnaire can be handed out as participants arrive and can be collected at the end of the meeting and kept together with the focus group record.

The discussion
The conductor’s next role is to kick off the discussion. This can be done by posing the predetermined questions to guide the discussion.

It is important that the conductor covers most, if not all, of the questions that were prepared for the session. Between 6 to 10 questions should be enough. The questions must touch on the important
topics that need to be covered. The conductor should begin with general questions and move to more specific focused questions as the discussion evolves.

During the focus group discussion, the conductor should keep an eye on the time. She or he should make sure that the conversation does not get stuck on a single point and that he or she helps the discussion move along the script, to cover most of the planned questions.

**Concluding**

When all questions have been discussed, or when there is only 10 minutes left, participants should be notified that the discussion is coming to an end. This will then allow time for the main points to be summarized.

The conductor may also ask participants whether there are any pending issues that have not been discussed in the meeting and that they would like to raise. Likewise, he or she should ask whether anybody has any other particular issue about the Checklist or the interview that he or she would like to raise, in private, with the conductor.

At that point, the conductor can conclude the meeting with a common consensus statement, reminding people that all comments will be anonymous and reminding participants to hand in the personal details questionnaire. He or she can then adjourn the meeting, thanking all participants for their assistance and contributions.

**Tips and Tricks: Managing conflicting opinion**

During the meeting, there will be differences of opinion and sometimes conflicting views. Remember that every opinion is valid, and that the purpose of the focus group is precisely to gather these different viewpoints. Capturing this diversity will be key to the success of the Checklist. Participants must be aware of this, and be ready to allow diverse opinions to emerge.

To facilitate and manage conflicting opinions, the conductor should:

- Try to create a trusting atmosphere (allowing participants to freely express themselves).
- Listen to all opinions.
- Be unbiased with responses
- Not criticise any opinion.
- Avoid any sign of favouritism.
- When the discussion swings off topic, bring the discussion back on track.
- Maintain a neutral point of view during the discussion
- Avoid making judgments about any views participants have expressed. There are no right or wrong answers.
- Avoid getting involved in discussions and stick to the role of conducting the meeting
- Ensure that participants can freely express their views and that relevant ideas are taken into account.
- Encourage all participants to talk about the questions.
- Motivate the quieter individuals.
- Make eye contact with all participants so they feel supported.
- Keep participants engaged as much as possible
- When the meeting comes to an end, ask “Does anyone have anything they want to clarify?”
3. After focus group is concluded

Transcribing the Results
The conductor should immediately summarize or transcribe the discussion with the main points drawn from the meeting. It is important that confidentiality of the participating individuals be maintained by not disclosing the names of participants in the transcript, and by no associating any statement in a manner that may easily lead to identifying the individual who made the statement.

Some suggestions are:

- Order the notes taken during the meeting;
- Select only relevant information;
- Structure the information according to the meeting structure.

The points emerging during the discussion may be simplified, however, it is important to maintain the variety and nuance of responses, for example, by transcribing some statements that are illustrative of a particular point, in as literal a manner as was provided by the participant.

Distributing results

- A summary with the main goals and conclusion that emerged from the focus group discussion should be sent to each participant.
- At the discretion of the project lead, other relevant persons involved in the project, could also receive a summary.
- An organized transcript from the focus group should be sent to the project lead and to the WHO Safe Childbirth Checklist Collaboration.
- The transcript of the results could serve as the basis for prioritizing the main barriers that emerged from the discussion and to try identifying solutions.
More information

More information can be found on these web pages:

7. http://www.who.int/patientsafety/implementation/checklists/instructions_focus_group.doc
Appendix 1: Checklist

This checklist is designed to help you prepare for a focus group. *If wished, this checklist can be printed and used to ensure key steps have been covered.*

**Checklist to organize a focus group**

*Have the participants been selected?*
- ☐ Invitation sent to between 5-15
- ☐ The place and date of meeting communicated
- ☐ Confirmations and reminders sent

*Have the main topics for discussion been selected?*
- ☐ 7-10 questions formulated
- ☐ General and broad questions

*Are you ready for the meeting?*
- ☐ Friendly place
- ☐ Materials ready
- ☐ Questionnaire printed
- ☐ Everybody can see/hear each other

**During the meeting…**
- ☐ Welcome and thank everyone for participation
- ☐ Express principal goal of the meeting
- ☐ Start with short introduction
- ☐ Explain methodology of focus group
- ☐ Request permission to record the session
- ☐ Break the ice and ask participants to introduce themselves
- ☐ Ask the predetermined questions giving them time to respond
- ☐ Make sure everybody speaks

**At the end of the meeting…**
- ☐ “Are there any more questions?”
- ☐ Wrap up main ideas
- ☐ Conclude, thank everyone

**After the meeting…**
- ☐ Transcribe the main results
- ☐ Distribute transcript
Appendix 2: Demographic details

This template is an example of demographic details you should collect from participants. Feel free to add additional responses.

Gender

☐ Male  ☐ Female

Profession

☐ Midwife  ☐ Nurse  ☐ Doctor  ☐ Other ________________

How long have you worked in maternal care?

☐ <1 year  ☐ 1-2 years  ☐ 2-5 years  ☐ 5-10 years  ☐ >10 years

How long have you worked in your current role?

☐ <1 year  ☐ 1-2 years  ☐ 2-5 years  ☐ 5-10 years  ☐ >10 years

Approximately how many deliveries have you participated in in the last month?

______________

Approximately how many deliveries have you participated in in the last year?

______________

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire.

Note: This template provides an example to facilitate collecting demographic data for each focus group participant. These data will be helpful in interpreting the results. Please note that the name and other ID of the participants is not required. These template can be printed or photocopied. It should be handed out to all participants as they arrive to the meeting room, and collected once completed at the end of the meeting.
Appendix 3: Example of introduction to the focus group

Good morning/Good afternoon. My name is (…), I am a (i.e.: nurse, midwife, researcher..) and I am here today to help run the focus group discussion with you all.

I would like, first of all, to thank you for volunteering your time to take part in this important exercise. The purpose of this meeting is to gather your opinions about the use of the Safe Childbirth Checklist in your facility. You have been invited to participate as your point of view is very important. All of you have direct experience of using the Safe Childbirth Checklist. You may have witnessed its potential benefits and some of the difficulties that may have arisen with its use. We hope that your insights and experiences using the Checklist will help identify strengths and weaknesses of the tool, and barriers that may hinder implementation. Your input is much appreciated.

I will explain the methodology of the focus group. I will ask general questions about the use of the checklist to facilitate the discussion. The questions are very general and require no specific knowledge, only your experience and thoughts.

Each of you is free to express your own opinion. You do not have to speak in any particular order, but only one person should speak at a time.

Your views may well differ from others in the group. Remember there are no right or wrong answers. If there are any questions or discussions that you do not feel comfortable to answer or participate in, you should not feel obliged to do so. However, please try to be as involved as possible, and do answer as accurately and honestly as possible. The discussion will remain confidential and I ask you all to uphold this confidentiality when leaving the room. Your opinions will be transcribed anonymously and they will be used by the research team and for improvement purposes only.

If you agree, I will tape this discussion as it will help me to recall what has been said and to prepare a transcript of the session. But, despite being taped, I would like to assure you that the discussion will remain anonymous. The tapes will be kept safely in a locked facility until they are transcribed word for word, then they will be destroyed. The transcribed notes of the meeting will contain no information that would allow you to be linked to specific statements. If there are any objections to this, please let me know now.

You will find a brief questionnaire on your seats. Please could you kindly fill it in and return it to me at the end of the meeting?

Does anyone have any questions?

OK, let’s begin.

To “break the ice”, I would first like everyone to introduce themselves. I know that many of you know each other in the group, but it would still be useful to introduce yourselves. I’d like you to give your name, what area of the department you work in, your role, and why you have decided to join this group.

Now that we have each introduced ourselves, I’ll ask a few questions that I hope each of you will be able to answer and share your thoughts or opinions on ....”

.................................
(Concluding)…………

I think this has been a very successful discussion. Thank you very much for participating in it. Your opinions will be a valuable asset to the Safe Childbirth Checklist project. I hope you have found the discussion as interesting as I have.

If there is anything else you would still like to raise, or else, if there is anything you are unhappy with or wish to complain about, please contact me later. I would like to remind you that any comments featured in this report will be totally anonymous. Please do keep contents of today’s discussions to yourself.

Before you leave, please hand in your completed personal details questionnaire.

Thank you once again.
Appendix 4: Example questions

1. To what extent have you used the Safe Childbirth Checklist in your facility? (10 minutes)
   Prompts:
   - Used the Checklist in its entirety
   - Only used some items
   - Sometimes
   - Most births…etc.

2. In your view, what aspects of using the Checklist have been positive and helpful? In what aspects has the Checklist helped you in your work? (20 minutes)
   Prompts:
   - Reminding me of things to do
   - Organizing supplies
   - Communicating with other staff
   - Communicating with the mother, …)

3. In your view, what aspects of using the Checklist have been more negative or unhelpful? In which specific ways did the Checklist hinder you in your work? In what ways has using the Checklist complicated your work? (20 minutes)
   Prompts:
   - Took time
   - Difficult to find the Checklist
   - Difficult to fill it in
   - Too many users of the Checklist
   - Difficult to include it with the patient records
   - Difficult to fulfil some of the items, …)

4. Were there particular items or aspects of the Checklist that posed special difficulty? Why? (15 minutes)

5. Did you feel you had sufficient training or understanding of the Checklist to be able to use it properly? (15 minutes)

6. In retrospect, what would you do differently to facilitate use of the Checklist in your facility? (15 minutes)

7. In retrospect, how do you think use of Checklist could be improved in your facility? (15 minutes)

8. Overall, what do you think of the Checklist as a tool to improve birth practices? What would you add to it? Or delete from it? (20 minutes)

9. Is there anything else that you consider important and that was not been discussed in this forum? Would you like to add anything? (10 minutes)

10. Of all the things we have discussed today, what would you say are the most important issues you have expressed? (10 minutes)
Thank you for your collaboration

If you have any questions, please contact WHO at patientsafety@who.int, or initiate a discussion through SharePoint at http://workspace.who.int/sites/childbirth_checklist/default.aspx.