

FAQ 33: What are good approaches to conducting focus groups with parents?

What's the issue?

In the last few years internet parental mediation has been widely studied by academics (see Garmendia *et al.*, 2012). What types of strategies parents apply for children, when they apply these strategies, how these strategies contribute to reducing risks, etc. are usually the main questions addressed in most of these studies. Most of these researchers have developed a quantitative children-centred approach. Parents and children's statements linked to different questions related to parental mediation have been contrasted, but little formal attention has been paid to parents' perceptions regarding their own internet parenting habits. Why do they apply a specific type of strategy? How do they feel when their children are online? Do they have any concerns or worries? What are their perceptions about their responsibilities with parenting the internet? Qualitative methodology, specifically, focus groups with parents, are recommended in order to find out how parents perceive their role as mediators with the internet.

Common practice

Qualitative methods are commonly used by researchers to explore in-depth specific questions where the facts need to be contrasted with the perceptions of the individuals that are being analysed, or where sensitive issues related to the problem addressed need to be explored in depth. One of the most effective qualitative methods to get these results is the focus group.

The importance of this method lies on the interaction established between the participants (parents) rather than in the questions addressed by the researcher to the observed group. Focus groups tend to be shaped by the spontaneity of all the participants who have been recruited and not by the 'directivity' between the observer (researcher) and the observed (participants) (see Callejo, 2001: 17). One of the main advantages of focus groups is that their open structure allows all the individuals to react in a natural way – agreeing or disagreeing – against the answers of the other individuals. The synergy that comes up in the group permits the researcher to obtain results that could not be obtained with qualitative methods such as personal interviews (see Stewart, Shamdasani, & Dennis, 2007: 43).

Questions to consider

The first thing to take into account when organizing a focus group with parents is to have a very deep knowledge of the topic that is going to be addressed. Researchers need to be very clear about the specific issues that they want to be addressed by the participants, and the goals that they want to achieve. Perhaps this could seem a very obvious detail, but due to the specific characteristics of this technique, exhaustive work is required before facing the group that is to be studied.

Focus groups dynamics cannot be compared with other qualitative methods such as group interviews in which the researcher or observer can participate in the debate. In this specific case, researchers need to adopt a neutral role regarding the group studied. They have to present the topic to be discussed in a very open way, and should have a guide with questions to be addressed during the debate. They might act in the focus group as a simple guide to expose a wide open topic (not closed or direct questions), and their interventions may be limited to specific occasions when the group discussions need to be re-focused.

This technique with parents is recommended to obtain results related to personal perceptions about topics that may be very sensitive for parents. There is ample evidence, mostly based on quantitative studies, showing some tendency amongst parents to overestimate the mediation strategies they apply to their children as well as awareness of the risks that their children may encounter online, and how they cope with them (see Hasebrink *et al.*, 2009). Being in a group usually allows the participants to show their perceptions and to express themselves in a more natural way, and topics such as sexual content, cyberbullying, meeting strangers, etc. can be addressed with more spontaneity.

It is also important to choose an appropriate location in order to make the group feel comfortable in establishing a conversation about sensitive topics. The children's school is usually considered one of the most convenient places to develop the study as all the participants are familiar with it. It is also important to make the participants feel confident that the information that is going to be discussed in that session will not be disclosed with their personal information.

The sample characteristics can also influence the dynamics of the focus group. As far as the number of group members is concerned, an ideal group is no more than eight parents and not less than six. The personal characteristics of the parents also need to be taken into account. Individuals may be recruited with a similar socio-economic status (level of income and education). The gender or age of the parents should not influence the recruitment process, but those individuals may be selected who usually spend more time helping or guiding their children when they are online. This will help researchers conclude in an indirect way if the parent's gender has an influence when mediating the children's use of the internet or not.

Pitfalls to avoid

There are few bad practices that you need to avoid in order not to negatively influence the focus group dynamic.

It is clear that even though the recruitment of the sample is done with the objective of collecting individuals with very similar socio-demographic and socio-economic characteristics in order to permit a more fluent and natural dialogue between them, every individual has her/his own personality. Try to make a quick scan of the participants at the beginning of the session, and identify those with stronger or weaker personalities. Opinion leaders as well as individuals who don't express themselves in a discussion can influence the process of the study. Make sure that the interventions of all the participants are balanced, and that every opinion of every member of the group is valid.

Encourage the group to express their feelings and perceptions. They need to feel that the most important matter is the discussion they are going to lead. In order to achieve this goal, you could introduce yourself at the beginning in a very discreet way, trying to avoid the participants considering you as a judge of their opinions.

You could have a negative influence, even provoking a pause in the discussion, if you address direct questions at the participants, and above all, when very sensitive questions are being approached such as cases of cyberbullying and how parents mediate in these cases. Parents usually show themselves reluctant to recognize that their children do encounter risks online, and even more when their children have been involved in some risky or harmful activities or situations as perpetrators. The "third person" example may be an appropriate resource in order to make parents know that there are real cases when children have been victims or perpetrators of risky activities, and to give them examples of how those parents have acted in order to cope with that situation. Be impartial in every topic that you expose to the group.

Do not forget that this is not a casual conversation, and when the sample is going to be recruited (by yourself or another external person) avoid participants having close relationships amongst themselves (family, friends, etc.).

Examples of a study using focus groups with parents

A focus group with parents is the most appropriate technique in order to explore in depth the internet parental mediation process. In this specific case, a mixed methods design was adopted, specifically, a sequential explanatory design. As Lobe, Livingstone, & Haddon (2007: 15) state, the main purpose of this mixed design was to use the qualitative results to assist in explaining and interpreting the findings of the quantitative part.

The aim of this research was to examine the patterns that Spanish parents established to mediate their children's internet use (types of strategies, amount of time, connection between risks, harm and opportunities, and the strategies applied by parents, judgments of both children and parents related to the process, etc.). These premises were explained through the quantitative analyses, but as in most of the studies that focused on parental mediation, it was found that the effectiveness of parental mediation strategies with diminishing harm or risks and increasing children's advantages online could not be verified

without taking into account parents' perceptions and opinions. This is why focus groups with parents were organized.

The main purpose of this qualitative technique was to observe and analyse parents' discussions in order to explore in depth what motivated them to apply certain strategies. All of the questions studied implied sensitive topics related to individual perceptions: how confident they felt with helping their children when going online, how effective they perceived that parental mediation strategies were in order to avoid or cope with risks or harm, what motivated them to trust or not their children when they went online, which worries or concerns they noticed when minors were using the internet, etc. Focus groups with parents allowed these questions to be answered, as well as new paths in the research of parental mediation to be detected.

These groups were organized in two different public schools. Parents were recruited by an external person (the school psychologist), who followed all the instructions given by the researcher in order to select individuals with similar socio-economic characteristics who did not have any close relationship between them (relatives or friends). Groups were recruited attending to the age of the children. The sample consisted of four focus groups of individuals whose children were aged between 9 and 16 (the same age as in the quantitative sample). The first group were parents of children aged 9 and 10, the second were parents of children aged 11 and 12, the third were parents of children aged 13 and 14, and the fourth group were parents of children aged 15 and 16. The maximum number of individuals per group was 10 and the minimum 8.

As an external observer, it seems necessary to stress the positive as well as the negative experiences. In the first instance, all the parents recruited to participate in the focus group attended the appointment. Most of them – aware that the observer was studying children's use of the internet – considered this occasion a good chance to show the researcher certain worries or concerns related to their children's safety online as well as asking for advice. As a general rule, participants shared in a very open way all the topics that the observer exposed. Parents had very lively and enthusiastic conversations about different issues and shared all the experiences related to their children's activities online. Participants identified their own experiences with the others'.

In parallel to this, when very sensitive topics, such as risks or harm (cyberbullying above all), were addressed, the conversations stopped, and at this point the observer had to intervene with 'the third person' example in order to encourage them to talk openly. Knowing that their personal information was not going to be disclosed allowed the parents to expose very sensitive situations that some of their children had experienced. It was also interesting to notice that when the observer introduced herself as a researcher and gave them some information related to her experience with studying children on the internet, participants felt embarrassed to starting any conversation. In order to solve this, the observer had to clarify that the only source for her study was their perceptions and opinions. Right at the moment that parents were assured that none of their conversations were going to be judged by the researcher, the dynamics of the focus groups started working. (Maialen Garmendia, Spain)

Even though the recruitment of parents was a very complex process, the results obtained with the focus groups were very satisfactory. And this is why parental mediation researchers should apply the focus group technique in order to explore in depth parents' needs and perceptions with the parenting process.

References and further resources

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