**Key concerns when talking with children[[1]](#footnote-1):**

**1. Purpose**

Be clear on what your purpose is. Keep the purpose at the back of your head and tell the children what your purpose is Children may start talking about something else, be prepared to change focus according to the children’s interests. Sometimes children change focus to get a small “break”- allow some small talk, it can be relaxing and create a good atmosphere in the group, but bring the conversation back on track, respecting the personal space of the children. Remember most children enjoy talking to an adult that is genuinely interested.

**2. Prepare**

* what is the purpose of talking to the child/children
* What do you want the child/children to gain from this?
* Do you need more information in advance? It is wise to know something about the life conditions of children in the area/under the same conditions.
* Do the children know that you will talk to the parents and vice-versa?
* What problems and consequences could this communication have for the children and for you (moral, practical etc)?
* Prepare any materials (paper, pens, flipchart etc)

**3. The atmosphere.**

When you talk to children, you are as the adult the one responsible for the communication, although talking to children is not always predictable.

You should take care to create the best possible atmosphere by using the following principles:

**A. Safety**

It is essential for children to feel safe. This will make them more open, and give a good experience of joining the group.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Do** | **Do not** |
| **Make sure that the venue is physically safe** | **Punish children** |
| **Set ground rules. Children have the right but not the duty to speak. Everyone must listen** | **Laugh at children or allow mockery** |
| **Smile, be interested** | **Interrupt or allow interruptions** |
| **Be kind** | **Apply pressure for answers** |
| **Make sure that the children know what you will do with the information and know your purpose** | **Intimidate** |
| **Keep a light atmosphere** |  |
| **Get consent before talking to children** |  |
| **Be respectful when talking about parents, communities and culture** | **Pass personal judgement**  **You can say “It was very wrong what happened, children should not experience this….” Never say: “your mother was bad to hit you”.** |

**B. Validation**

Create the atmosphere that all the participants are valuable, and that all statement are OK, as long as they comply with the rules of mutual respect in the group. Many children in difficult circumstances feel shameful and have low self confidence- let them feel that they are valued and acknowledged.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Do** | **Do not** |
| **Let the children finish their sentences** | **Let any-one feel silly or inferior** |
| **If the discussion gets off track- sum up, validate the statements (“thank you”, “ok so you say that”, “right now you are telling us about”… and bring the conversation back on track.** |  |
| **Be flexible. Some unexpected important issues may turn up. Be prepared to follow the thinking of the children, but make sure that the whole group is following, and ask “is it ok we talk about this now?”** |  |
| **Validate the child’s perspective, a situation may be seen differently by adults.** | **Try to argue or impose an adult perspective- keep the child’s experience in focus.** |

**C. Inclusiveness**

In a group, everyone is a member, and should be allowed space. Children will share more with the group if they feel included and the group atmosphere is better if you make sure to include everyone

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Do** | **Do not** |
| **Let the children take turns** | **let anyone monopolize the situation** |
| **Some children need to be “invited”, you can use concrete examples to get the quiet children started** | **Never apply pressure** |
| **Let the group feel that you are equally interested in everyone** | **Be more interested in some than others** |

**4. Talking to children techniques**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Do** | **Do not** |
| **Mark clearly when you start and end.** | **Do not be too focused on facts – it is the experience and the feelings of the children that are important.** |
| **Make the child visible (identity markers).”Oh you are smiling today, I see you have a new pencil etc..)** | **Do not be too vague** |
| **Structure (create common focus).”Today I would like to hear your opinions about…”** |  |
| **Inform about plans and purpose** |  |
| **Acknowledge that he/she speaks about something difficult.** |  |
| **Take the child’s perspective seriously.** | **Do not promise more than you can keep.** |
| **Be sensitive to any feelings of guilt or conflict of loyalty in the children.** | **Do not speak in a devaluating way of parents** |
| **Reduce any emotional chaos by containing, accepting and identifying feelings. ”I think that may have made you feel proud, Oh perhaps you are angry about that..”**  **Highlight coping.”so when you were scared, you ran to the neighbours house, well done, then what?”** |  |
| **Explore the child’s experience/be curious.** | **Do not give direct advice.** |
| **Mirror ”I see that this makes you upset..”** | **Do not pressure the child to talk about personal issues that the is not comfortable with sharing** |
| **Respect the child’s physical and emotional boundaries** | **Avoid creating a situation where the child thinks that he/she has to please you by saying something specific** |
| **Give concrete examples** | **Do not talk too much about yourself or your own experiences** |
| **Sum up periodically** |  |
| **You can ask the same question in many different ways** |  |
| **Parallel stories “I know another boy who experienced the same thing…”.** |  |
| **Generalize ”many children have experiences- normalize the childrens reactions** |  |
| **I-statements ”I think that this must have made you confused..”** |  |
| **Use child-friendly language** | **Be careful with irony** |

1. These guidelines are taken from Dybdal, Anne-Sophie: *Guide to Focus Groups with Children* (publication in press) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)