

# Quick Tips #34

## Probing Questions in Interviews

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Often, we want or need more information than we get when we ask a question during an interview. *Probing* is asking follow-up questions when we do not fully understand a response, when answers are vague or ambiguous or when we want to obtain more specific or in-depth information. For example: "What did you like best about the program?"

Youth: "Everything was great."

Probe 1: "What was one thing that stood out?"

Youth: "I got to try different things."

Probe 2: "What things did you try?"

Youth: "I got to try playing the piano."

Probe 3: "What did you like about playing the piano?"

Youth: "It made me feel like I could do this...I've always wanted to try the piano but haven't had the chance and I thought I wouldn't be able to do it. I thought it would be too hard for me but I could do it...I want to try again."

In this example, it took three probes to find out what the youth really liked best, why and what this meant to him. This is the kind of information you want so it is important to follow up until you get information that provides meaningful detail.

In qualitative interviewing, probes cannot be planned in advance. It is impossible to know what relevant issue the person might raise and how you might need to probe to learn more. However, it is helpful to be familiar with probing and some general ways to probe. For example:

- Could you please tell me more about...
- I'm not quite sure I understood ...Could you tell me about that some more?
- I'm not certain what you mean by... Could you give me some examples?
- Could you tell me more about your thinking on that?
- You mentioned....Could you tell me more about that? What stands out in your mind about that?
- This is what I thought I heard...Did I understand you correctly?
- So what I hear you saying is..."
- Can you give me an example of...
- What makes you feel that way?
- What are some of your reasons for liking it?
- You just told me about.... I'd also like to know about....

Probing questions often begin with "what" or "how" because they invite more detail. Questions that begin with "Do you..." or "Are you..." invite personal reflection. "Why" questions can be problematic. They may put the respondent on the defensive or result in little useful information and require additional probing. Example: "Why did you do that?" "...because I wanted to". If possible, try to replace "why" with "what". With any question, watch for leading questions or bias in your probes.

#### References:

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