

## Discussion Guide: Becoming an Early Learning Community

For groups of parents, community residents, and/or service providers



### INSTRUCTIONS FOR THE FACILITATOR

This guide is designed to help you lead a discussion with a group of parents, community residents, or service providers. The goal of this discussion is to get their perspectives on how well the community is currently doing and what it could do better, as part of an effort to become an Early Learning Community. The questions in this discussion guide align with the ideas in the *Early Learning Community Action Guide* and Progress Rating Tool.

A few things to think about in setting up your discussion:

- You may want to bring a hard copy of the *Early Learning Community Action Guide*, or some handouts about the building blocks, for participants who are interested in learning more. (Find handouts here: <https://cssp.org/our-work/project/early-learning-nation/>)
- Compensate parents for their time with a gift card or stipend if you can.
- If holding an in-person meeting:
  - Set up chairs in a circle or around a table so that everyone can see and hear each other.
  - Be sure to provide child care if parents need it to participate. If you are also able to provide food or refreshments, even better!
  - If there is a white board or flip chart in the room, you may want to write a few prompts up in advance, such as, “My name is \_\_\_\_ and I’m here because...” or list the building blocks: “Commitment, Services, Neighborhoods, Policy”
- If you are meeting on an online platform such as Zoom:
  - Encourage all participants to turn on their cameras so they can see each other’s faces while they talk.
  - For introductions, call on people by name so that they aren’t guessing when is a good time to jump in. For the rest of the conversation, encourage people to raise their hand so you know they want to talk, and then leave room for others to chime in after those who raised their hands have spoken.
  - Consider using the “white board” feature or sharing your screen and taking notes on a Word document so participants can see what is being written.
  - If you record the meeting (which can be helpful for refreshing your notes later), let the participants know they are being recorded and how you will use the recording.

The document includes a script with a brief overview and introductions, followed by questions about each of the four building blocks. A few notes to keep in mind:

- Model the introductions by giving a reason for participating from your own experience or passion, e.g., “I’m here because I raised three children in this community and I want other families to thrive here too,” or “I’m here because I know our community cares about kids but I want us to be sure we’re reaching all families,” or “I’m here because I know that a lot of families can’t find quality child care for their kids and I want to figure out what we can do to make it better.”
- You don’t need to ask all of the questions related to each building block. (You may even decide not to discuss all of the building blocks, depending on your community’s goals.) Review them in advance and highlight high-priority questions. Get to the remaining questions if you have time.
- Determine roughly how long you can devote to each building block (e.g., for an hourlong discussion, after everyone is settled and introductions are made in the first 10 minutes, you can probably spend 12

minutes on each building block) and use a timer so you know when it is time to wrap up one building block and move to the next.

- Note that the last question for each building block focuses on what the community can do – this is the most important question for informing your community’s action plan. Skip to that one when you have a few minutes left for the building block.
- Be prepared that some people may start to share lengthy stories about challenges they have faced (such as getting health care, or finding child care), or may bring up current challenges they are facing. You will not be able to respond to all of this in the moment.
  - It can be helpful to “summarize and synthesize” in order to keep the conversation moving – for example, “What I hear you saying is that many people experience challenges with \_\_\_\_\_. I’ve captured that in our notes.”
  - You can also share referrals to a family resource center, child care resource & referral agency, or community resource phone line like 2-1-1 or Help Me Grow, or let the person know that you can talk to them one-on-one after the discussion, so that those needs can still be addressed.
- Using a flip chart to summarize people’s responses to a question (with 1-3 words for what someone said) can also be helpful for keeping people focused and for verifying that you heard what they were trying to say. (Online, you can do this with a notes page on a shared screen, or in the chat box.)
- Because of racial segregation in housing in many parts of the United States, conversations about communities and neighborhoods may lead some participants to make comments that explicitly or implicitly reflect racist attitudes. As a facilitator, be alert to these kinds of statements and don’t let remarks go unchallenged. Some ways you can respond include:
  - “Can you explain what you mean by that?”
  - “Let’s not rely on stereotypes.”
  - “It’s not helpful to blame people for the circumstances they live in. What can we do as a community to improve those circumstances?”

## SCRIPT

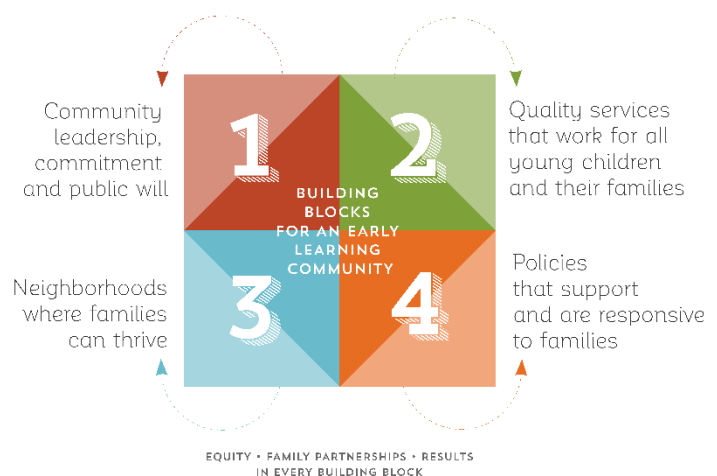
Our community is working to become an Early Learning Community. [Facilitator: explain how the community is defined for this project – neighborhood, town, city, county...]

An Early Learning Community is a place where all babies are welcomed into families and neighborhoods that have what they need to ensure children’s early learning and healthy development.

Let’s start with introductions. Please tell the group your first name and what made you decide to come out to participate in this discussion. I’ll start. My name is \_\_\_\_\_ and I am here because...

We want to hear from you about what you think is already going well in our community to support young children and their families, and what we could do better.

We’re going to talk about each of four “building blocks” that make up an Early Learning Community.



**1****Commitment**

The first building block is commitment: An Early Learning Community prioritizes and invests in ensuring that all young children thrive.

- What specific things about our community make you feel like young children and their families are a priority here?
- What specific things make you feel like young children and their families are not a priority?
- Do you see or hear messages about the importance of early childhood, parenting, or brain development in this community?
- Do you feel that most families in this community have strong social connections, people they can rely on?
- Do you feel that families in this community know where to get help when they need it?
- If you needed to get help for your child, your family, or a friend, where would you start?
- What do you think your community can do to show more of a commitment to early childhood?

**2****Services**

The second building block is services: All children and families have access to the high-quality services and supports they need.

- Have you and the families you know been able to access high-quality health care? If not, what challenges have you faced in accessing health care?
- Are you satisfied with the options you have for early care and education for your child (daycare, child care, or preschool)? What challenges do you see families facing when it comes to child care?
- Has your family accessed any family support services such as home visiting, parenting education, playgroups, or a family resource center? What was your experience with those services?
- Have any children you know needed early intervention (Birth to Three) services or other help for developmental delays? What is your impression of how well those services work? Is it easy to access them when they are needed?
- When you take your child to the clinic, child care, or other services, do you feel that you are treated with respect by the professionals there? Does the community value parents?
- What do you think your community can do to ensure that all families have access to high-quality services?

### 3

#### **Neighborhoods**

The third building block is neighborhoods: Families live in neighborhoods where their children can grow up safe and healthy.

*Facilitator note: Unless you are holding a focus group in a particular neighborhood and know that everyone lives there – start by going around the group and asking what neighborhood or school attendance area they live in – however people categorize the areas in this community. In rural areas, people may not relate to the term “neighborhood” in these questions as much as they might to “town” or “the area where you live” – adjust as needed.*

- Does your neighborhood feel safe?
- From your neighborhood, do you have easy access to jobs, banks, schools, and other services?
- Do you feel a sense of connection to your neighbors? What makes you feel that way?
- Do you and your neighbors feel hopeful about being able to fix any problems the neighborhood faces?
- What would you like to see your community do to improve neighborhoods for families?

### 4

#### **Policy**

The final building block is policy: Local policies create a broad framework of support for all families with young children. When we talk about policies, we mean things like child care subsidy rules, rules for sick leave or parental leave, immigration policies, health care policy, and all the other ways that government rules and programs affect families. Employers can also have some of their own policies that make it easier or harder for their employees to raise their kids.

- Do you feel policies are in place that make it easier to raise your children in this community?
- Does your community do anything to promote family-friendly policies in workplaces?
- Do you feel that government leaders and policymakers pay attention to how their decisions will affect families with young children?
- What would you like to see your community do to make things better for families who are raising young children?