Center *for the* Study *of* Social Policy
Ideas into Action

Discussion Guide: Becoming an Early Learning Community

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 people's 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 Assessment Tool*.

Additional facilitator notes at the end of this document may be helpful as you prepare for this discussion. In particular, note that you do not need to ask all eight questions about each building block – review them in advance to determine which questions to prioritize.

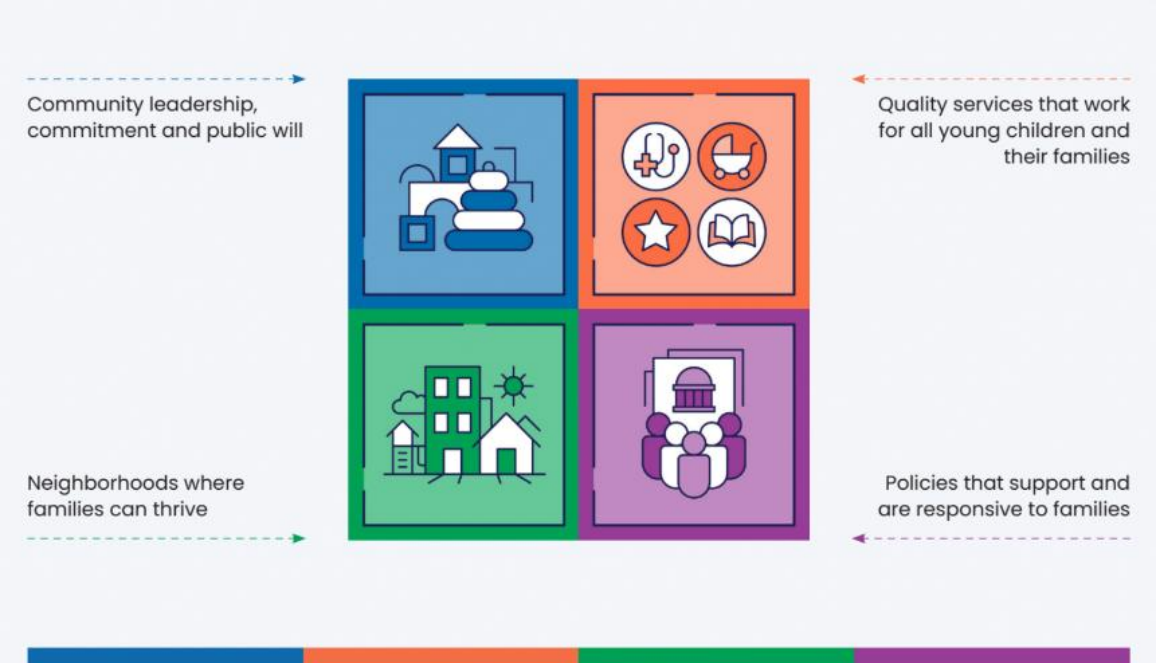
FACILITATOR SCRIPT

Our community is working to become an Early Learning Community. An Early Learning Community is a city, town, village, or county that promotes learning and development prenatally through the early years of elementary school so that all children can thrive. *[Facilitator: explain how you are defining the community for this project – your town, city, or county.]*

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.





Commitment

The first building block is community leadership, commitment, and public will. At the heart of an Early Learning Community is a common understanding that children and families are a priority. This requires support from leaders, direction of funding and other resources to early childhood, and public will.

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



Services

The second building block is quality services that work for all young children and their families. Families and children in an Early Learning Community have easy access to high-quality and family-centered services. Some combination of these services and supports are available in all communities. In an Early Learning Community, they are well-coordinated, supported to improve quality and access, and responsive to families' needs.

1. How well are services coordinated in our community? What improvements could be made?
2. What improvements could be made to make health care and family services more accessible and family-friendly in our community?
3. 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? What types of care are missing or in short supply in our community?
4. 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?
5. 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?
6. 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?
7. How can we better gather and respond to feedback from families to improve services and supports?
8. What do you think our community can do to ensure that all families have access to high-quality services?

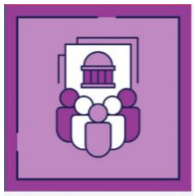


Neighborhoods

The third building block is neighborhoods where families can thrive. Families are affected by all aspects of the communities where they live – including whether they have access to healthy food, outdoor spaces, clean air and water; the availability of healthy and safe housing; and whether they feel connected to their neighbors. Early Learning Communities focus on improving neighborhood conditions to ensure safe, healthy environments for families and children.

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 relate to "town" or "the area where you live" – adjust as needed.

1. Does your neighborhood feel safe? Are there particular safety concerns or areas that need attention?
2. From your neighborhood, do you have easy access to jobs, banks, schools, and other services?
3. Does your community have safe outdoor spaces for children to play and for families to get together?
4. What improvements would you like to see in the housing options available in your neighborhood or in the community as a whole?
5. How does your neighborhood support or hinder your and your family's ability to lead a healthy and fulfilling life?
6. Do you feel a sense of connection to your neighbors? What makes you feel that way? How much do you interact with your neighbors, and what does that look like in your neighborhood?
7. Do you believe that you and your neighbors have the ability to fix any problems the neighborhood faces? What role do you think community members should play in improving neighborhood conditions?
8. What would you like to see our community do to improve neighborhoods for families?



Policies

The final building block is policies that support and are responsive to families. In an Early Learning Community, attention is paid to how policies can support children and families. This includes policies that affect families' economic well-being and ability to meet their needs, policies that directly govern child and family services, and broader community-level policies that shape the contexts in which families live.

1. Are you aware of any policies that make it easier to raise your children in this community?
2. How do current policies support parents in their role as caregivers? Are there gaps that need to be addressed?
3. What types of policies would better support families in achieving economic well-being?
4. Does your community do anything to promote family-friendly policies in workplaces?
5. What policy changes would you like to see as it relates to child care, early learning, and K-12 education in our community?
6. Do you feel that government leaders and policymakers pay attention to how their decisions will affect families with young children?
7. How involved are community members in shaping policies that affect families? What strategies could be implemented to ensure that families' voices are heard and incorporated in policy development?
8. What would you like to see our community do to make things better for families who are raising young children?

FACILITATOR NOTES

Meeting Set-Up

- You may want to bring a hard copy of the *Early Learning Community Action Guide and Assessment Tool*, 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 participants 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.
    - Be sure to provide child care if parents need it to participate. If you are also able to provide transportation, food, or beverages, 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, Policies"
- 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 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.

Planning your Discussion

This 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:

- 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 goals.
- Review the questions 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 (for example, 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.

Facilitation Tips

- 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."
- Some people may start to share lengthy stories about current or past challenges they have faced (such as getting health care, or finding child care). Important messages may be conveyed through this kind of storytelling. However, you won't be able to respond to all of this in the moment, and you may need to move a participant along so that other people can also be heard.
    - It can be helpful to summarize what's been said in order to keep the conversation moving – for example, "What I hear you saying is that ___ is a challenge for families. 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.
- 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, ethnic, and class 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 or other biases. 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?"

Follow-Up

- Notes from your group's discussion (including how many people participated, from which parts of the community) should be shared with the people leading your Early Learning Community (ELC) efforts. In particular, any action steps that were suggested should be noted and added to the list of potential action steps as you build your ELC Action Plan.
- It's important to let people know how their input was used and give them more opportunities to be part of the work as it progresses. Let your discussion participants know when a draft ELC Action Plan is drafted and invite them to give feedback on it!