

Family Narrative Toolkit

Conducting Group Discussions with Families

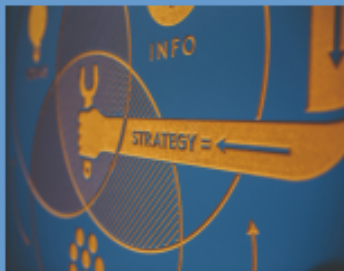
March 2017



TOOLKIT CONTENTS

Below is an overview of what you will find in this toolkit.

PART 1: STRATEGIZING



pages 3-4

- + Why conduct a group discussion?
- + Group discussions vs. one-on-one conversations
- + Sensitivity in discussions with families

PART 2: PREPARING



pages 4-6

- + Preparing for a group discussion
- + Developing a discussion guide
- + Writing effective discussion questions

PART 3: EXECUTING



pages 7-9

- + Conducting a group discussion
- + Tips for ensuring that all participants are heard
- + Following a group discussion

Why Conduct a Group Discussion?

Group discussions can help you gather in-depth, honest, and nuanced information from families. Complex questions can have complex answers, and a group discussion allows families the opportunity to share openly, build off each other's perspectives, and more thoroughly share what they're thinking or feeling.

Group Discussions vs. One-On-One Conversations

There are times when group discussions are a great tool for gathering information from families. However, there are some times when group discussions are not ideal, as families may feel hesitant to speak openly in front of others about certain topics. In those instances, a one-on-one conversation with a family member may be more suitable. Below are some characteristics of one-on-one conversations and group discussions to keep in mind.

| Group Discussions | One-On-One Conversation |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Participants can build off each other; a comment made by one participant might remind another participant of something relevant➤ Participants have the opportunity to share deep, nuanced, and varied information➤ Planning, coordination, and recruitment may take some time, but the discussion is often complete in under 1.5 hours | <ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Participants may feel more comfortable discussing potentially sensitive topics for families (i.e., family difficulties, financial struggles, or health concerns)➤ Participants won't be influenced by the responses of others, or feel the need to agree with what someone else has said➤ Planning, coordination, and recruitment may take some time, and conducting individual conversations can add up |

Consider your options and the needs of your community when deciding whether to hold a group discussion or a one-on-one conversation. Keep in mind that if you choose to hold a group discussion, it should be planned to ensure a non-threatening environment in which families feel free to talk openly and honestly.

Sensitivity in Discussions With Families

Even after carefully considering your options and deciding that a group discussion is appropriate, some discussion topics may be difficult for families and make them feel uncomfortable. Consider the following tips for handling sensitive group discussions with families:

- Let participants know at the beginning of the discussion that they can decline to answer any question, or stop participating altogether.



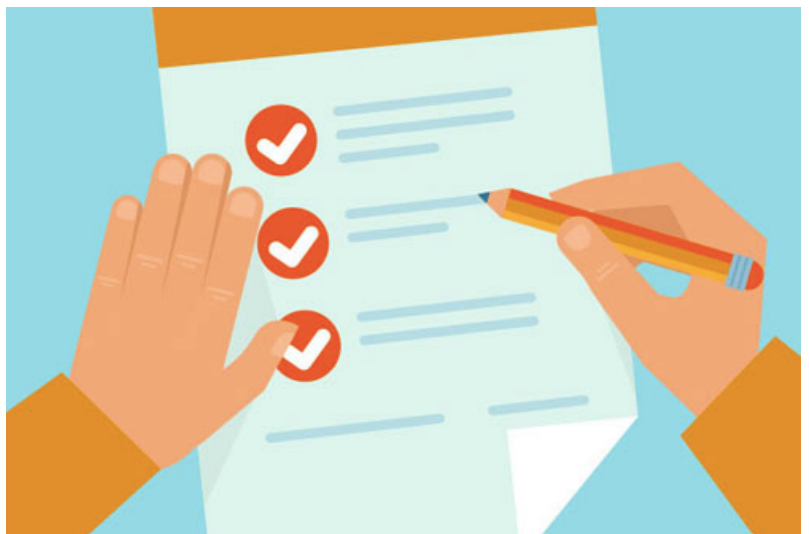
- Let participants know that any information they share with you will be kept confidential, and that you will never share specific anecdotes or quotes and publicly attribute them directly to a participant.
- If a participant says he/she does not feel comfortable answering a question, thank him/her and let him/her know you acknowledge and appreciate their honesty.
- If a participant looks visibly uncomfortable during the discussion, you can acknowledge, out loud, that the topic may be sensitive and that you value the opinions and experiences they can share.
- If participants are not comfortable answering a question, you may try moving on to a different topic and coming back to the original topic later – at that point, you can try ask the question in a slightly different manner to see if participants are more comfortable answering.
- If a participant decides not to continue participating, allow him/her to leave the discussion and follow-up with them privately immediately after the end of the discussion.

Preparing for a Group Discussion

Consider the following steps when planning and preparing for a group discussion with families.

STEP 1: Decide Whom to Invite and Schedule the Discussion

- Try to gather a group of participants that are representative of the families in the community and who may offer a variety of perspectives, not just those who are most vocal, involved, or have had the most positive or negative experiences.
- You likely want to hear from families of varied cultural and ethnic backgrounds, with children of varied ages, and with varied family compositions (i.e., single parents, grandparents, etc.)
- You may want to hold the discussion during a time you have already planned to meet with families, such as before or after a playgroup, teacher-child conference, or other event. This may feel less burdensome for families and result in higher rates of participation.
- You may also want to hold several group discussions at different dates or times, to allow more families, with different schedules, to participate.
- Aim for a group of 6-8 participants – in a larger group it may be difficult to hear everyone’s opinions, and in a smaller group, there may not be enough active conversation. If possible, avoid groups larger than 10.



STEP 2: Invite Participants to Take Part in the Discussion

- Spread the word about the group discussion using word-of-mouth, flyers, communication via social media, email or text, or by personally inviting family members.

- Encourage community participation in the group discussion by helping families and other community members feel invited and welcome. Let community members know that they have a valuable perspective to share.
- Describe the local impact that participation in the group discussion can have. Tell participants how they, their children, early childhood providers, teachers, and other community members may benefit from the findings the discussion will yield.
- Describe the broader societal impact the discussion findings may have. Share with participants the broad goals for the project, and details about how other families, early childhood providers, teachers, and whole communities across the state, the country, or the world may benefit from the discussion group findings.

STEP 3: Prepare Materials

- Develop a discussion guide with the list of questions you want to ask (*see below for strategies for writing discussion questions*).
- Have a recorder ready, as you'll want to make sure the important parts of the discussion don't get lost. Make sure the recorder has enough space to record, and that it has enough battery power.
- Decide if you can offer an incentive for participation. Ideas include, gift cards, food and drinks, and prizes.

STEP 4: Tackle Additional Logistics

- Find a time and date that will work for most families, keeping in mind the schedules and needs of those in your community.
- Find a location that is familiar and accessible to families. If possible, help remove barriers such as need for childcare or transportation.
- Determine who will be the discussion leader, and arrange to have another person responsible for taking notes and ensuring the recorder is turned on, charged, and starts recording once the discussion begins.
- On the day of the discussion, arrange seating in a way that allows participants to see each other and that will elicit natural conversation, such as a circle or half-moon shape.
- Check with your organization or school district whether any approvals must be obtained before conducting or audio recording a discussion with families. Some districts or organizations require approval from an Institutional Review Board (IRB), and/or additional documentation, such as a signed informed consent form from each participant.



Developing a Discussion Guide

Before the discussion, you will want to prepare a discussion guide that will outline important information to share with participants, as well as a list of questions to ask. Here are some steps to follow in developing the discussion guide:

- Start with a short overview of the project or initiative, and the purpose and goals of the discussion.
- Introduce yourself and your role in the discussion, and then ask participants to introduce themselves one by one. These introductions will give a sense of who is in the room and allow participants an opportunity to create connections.
- Think about the order in which you want to present your questions. It's a good idea to start with more general, broad questions and focus in on more specific questions as you go on.
- Develop overarching questions that cover each of the themes you want to touch on, and then create follow-up probing questions (or sub-questions) in case you need more information or clarification.
- Keep in mind the goal of the discussion, and ask only questions that directly speak to those goals.
- If you are planning to conduct multiple discussions, plan to have a debrief period after the first few discussions to reflect on what went well and what didn't. Decide if anything needs improvement and identify questions that may not be working well. After this reflection period, you can modify, add, or remove questions from the discussion guide.

Writing Effective Discussion Questions

Consider the following tips for writing discussion questions:

- Ask open-ended questions, as these are the types of questions that will generate the richest information. Open-ended questions are those that cannot be answered with just one word.
- Avoid questions that can be answered with a simple "yes" or "no," as these questions will not elicit in-depth, rich, responses.
- Questions should be short and to the point; avoid asking long questions that could be misunderstood.
- Avoid questions that ask about multiple ideas at once, as participants may not be sure what aspect of the question to focus on.
- Avoid phrasing questions in a way that may influence participants to respond in a certain way, or which convey bias to a certain point of view. You do not want to "lead" participants to a specific response or conclusion, but rather encourage participants to share their honest thoughts and opinions.
- Avoid asking "why" questions, as they can sometimes make participants feel defensive. Instead, focus on "what" and "how" questions that can allow for more active discussion.

Conducting a Group Discussion

Consider the following steps when conducting a group discussion:

- Thank participants for coming and begin to establish a comfortable environment that will allow participants to open up. Set a warm, friendly tone and communicate that you are there to learn from participants, and are interested in their perspective as experts in their own and the community's experiences.
- Review the purpose and goals for the discussion, and give an overview of the agenda/timeline. If you are recording the discussion, you can also let participants know at this time.
- Set ground rules for the discussion before diving into any questions. Here are some examples of ground rules that you may set:
 - There are no right or wrong answers. We are interested in your own perspective and that of others in the room.
 - Please be respectful of people while they are talking, and their different ideas.
 - Please do not use your cell phones during this conversation. If you need to use your phone, please step out of the room and return when you are finished.
- Ask participants for verbal consent to participate in the discussion. You can obtain consent by asking if participants agree to participate, and asking each person to respond verbally, one by one. If your organization or school district requires written informed consent, distribute informed consent forms to participants, and ask that they read and sign the form. Answer any questions participants may have about the process. Collect signed informed consent forms and keep for your records.
- Follow your discussion guide, asking one question at a time and using probes or follow-up questions when you think more information is needed, or it when it seems that participants did not understand the original question.
- Do not rush through your discussion questions, but be mindful of the time so that you can be respectful of participants' time.
- Toward the end of the discussion, after you have covered all of the questions you prepared, remind participants of the purpose of the discussion and ask if there is anything additional they would like to share.
- At the end of the discussion, thank participants for being present and engaging in the discussion.



Tips for Ensuring That All Participants Are Heard

During the discussion, it may be difficult to capture the perspective of all participants. Consider the following techniques to ensure that all opinions are heard:

- Paraphrase and summarize long or complex responses and ask the participants if you captured their thoughts accurately.



- When you don't understand a participant's answer, ask for clarification, additional details, or specific examples.
- Maintain a neutral demeanor, not indicating whether you like/agree or dislike/disagree with any comments, and keeping your personal views out of the discussion. Expressing your personal views may convey to participants who have a differing view that their perspective is not welcome or valid.

indicate that you are actively listening and understanding (i.e., head nodding, saying "thank you," or, "that is helpful").

- Encourage shy or quiet participants to speak up by making eye contact. At the end of the discussion, you can also offer the opportunity for a one-on-one conversation to participants who were shy or uncomfortable speaking during the group discussion.
- When one participant is dominating the conversation, you can give other participants an opportunity to speak by thanking the participant for his/her contribution, and asking if others have additional, or different opinions or experiences to share.
- Pause for responses, and allow silence in the room. This may encourage some participants to speak up, or give additional time to those who need to process the question and gather their thoughts.
- Avoid interrupting participants while they are speaking. If you would like to follow-up on something they said, make a mental note to ask about it once they have finished their thought.

Following a Group Discussion

At the end of the group discussion you will have gathered valuable information. Consider the following steps to make the most of the information collected:

- **Finalize your notes.** If you recorded the discussion, make a transcript of the recording. If you did not record the discussion, review your notes immediately after the discussion. Fill in gaps and important details while they are still fresh in your memory.
- **Identify themes or patterns.** Review your notes and/or transcripts and note illustrations that speak to the experiences of participants in relationship to the discussion questions. Look for themes



or patterns; these would include ideas or experiences shared across participants, or those that were mentioned consistently throughout the discussion.

- **Seek a second opinion.** If possible, ask a colleague to review the notes and/or transcripts and see what patterns or themes they are able to identify. It may also be helpful to have a discussion about your identified themes, to help solidify themes and conclusions, or clarify areas of confusion.
- **Share your findings.** Present your findings to participants, the larger community, and other stakeholders. When reporting your findings, remember not to share any information that could be used to identify families or individual participants. To the extent possible, use your findings to inform future efforts or programming in your community.

SOURCES

Community Toolbox (n.d.) Chapter 3, Section 6: Conducting Focus Groups. <http://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/assessment/assessing-community-needs-and-resources/conduct-focus-groups/main>

Krueger, R.A. (2002). Designing and Conducting Focus Group Interviews. <http://www.eiu.edu/~iheec/Krueger-FocusGroupInterviews.pdf>

Omni Institute (n.d.). Information Gathering Toolkit: Basic Tools for Quantitative and Qualitative Data Collection. <http://www.omni.org/Media/Default/Documents/Information%20Gathering%20Toolkit.pdf>