

Preventing Child Neglect – Harnessing Community Power through Conversation

A Conversation Guide



FRIENDS National Center for Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention
A Service of the Children's Bureau



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Child Neglect is the failure to meet children's basic needs, whether the failure is the responsibility of parents, communities or society, the void places children in harm's way.... Friends, family members, neighbors, professional staff, educators, faith community leaders and all the rest of us have shared responsibility for and important roles to play in helping to ensure that all children grow up free from harm, with their needs met and with adults who care for them and about them.

(National Alliance of Children's Trust and Prevention Funds)

Purpose of Guide

This conversation guide is designed to help community stakeholders (service providers, legislators, parents, educators, clergy, housing coordinators and others in contact with families) have meaningful conversations about preventing child neglect. Child neglect is the most widespread type of child maltreatment and requires a comprehensive strategy to address the causes. Preventing child neglect requires changes at the society, community and family levels.

Neglect counts for over 3/4 of confirmed cases of child abuse and neglect in the U.S.

(Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2018)

Guided discussions that address the contextual issues that impact child neglect can:

- Increase awareness about the underlying causes of child neglect as well as develop effective strategies to prevent it.
- Build capacity for collaboration between families, service providers and policy makers.
- Identify resources that are available in the community to support families and mitigate risk.
- Engage community leaders in partnering to prevent child neglect.



Starting the Conversation

Dialogue is a way to bring diverse voices together and is an important strategy for developing and building relationships. Active listening and sharing are key components of successful conversations. Asking open-ended and thought-provoking questions is the foundation of a compelling conversation.

Ronsley Vaz, president of Amplify, an Australian marketing firm, said that conversations, “can be a process to clarify your own thinking, they can present an opportunity to be educated, and they can be a creative spark that changes your whole life. They can give a voice to the voiceless.” (Vaz, n.d.)

The following steps may help guide your planning of a meaningful and effective conversation.



Planning (with Partners)

It's helpful to convene a group of people that can help plan the conversation. An important first step is to determine whom to include on the planning committee. A planning committee can discuss the goal of the conversation and format the discussion accordingly, including who will serve as the facilitator (Center for Teaching Excellence, n.d.). Assembling the right planning committee is an important step to assuring that the conversation is inclusive and responsive to the needs of the community. Consider partnering with a local organization or agency that already has a relationship with community members and can encourage and support their participation.

The following community stakeholders could be great partners in hosting a conversation about preventing child neglect:

- Schools and Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs)
- Libraries
- Housing developments and neighborhood associations
- Parent support/education programs
- Head Start/early childhood centers/childcare centers
- Faith-based organizations
- Substance use treatment programs
- Local businesses (hair salons, barber shops, laundromats)
- Domestic violence shelters/programs
- Local child welfare departments
- Family resource or support centers
- Home visiting programs
- Homeless shelters
- Recreation centers
- Mental health services
- Law Enforcement
- Military bases
- Tribes/Tribal communities
- Other human service providers





Choosing Facilitator(s)

Depending on the format you choose, the planning committee may need to choose one or more facilitators and recorders.

Choosing a facilitator will be an important consideration. Much more than a host or emcee, the facilitator needs to convey trustworthiness, openness, and knowledge. Consider a skilled facilitator that is also a parent leader, respected member of the community, and/or someone with lived experience. The facilitator should be able to create an environment conducive to the discussion and be comfortable addressing tension that may arise. A facilitator should also be comfortable highlighting the themes of the discussion and keep the group focused on the discussion's purpose without sacrificing important points that may be raised which are outside the scope the planners originally envisioned.

Acts of Omission is a bulletin about child neglect for professionals published by Child Welfare Information Gateway. This could be a resource to prepare for community discussions or to stay informed about new information or trends. View issues here: <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/focus/acts/>

Preparing

While it can be valuable to be flexible about the outcome of a conversation, it may be useful for the planning committee to discuss if there are particular outcomes that are desired. This will help guide who



to invite, what outreach is needed and inform the facilitation of the agenda. A discussion where the only goal is to raise awareness is different from one with a goal of sparking advocacy efforts or inspiring participants to take some other action.

It may be helpful to offer some information about child neglect before the formal discussion begins. The Alliance of Children's Trust and Prevention Funds developed a tool designed to create structured,

community-based training sessions on preventing child neglect. Offering a training as a kickoff to the discussion is one strategy to consider. One can access that toolkit at <https://ctfalliance.org/preventing-child-neglect/>.

Featuring a parent's story either via video or inviting a prepared parent speaker with lived experience can be a powerful tool to educate and inspire participants to engage in the discussion. The FRIENDS National Center and the Alliance of Children's Trust and Prevention Funds worked together to gather the perspectives and expertise of parents from across the country on child neglect and the impact preventing it can have on families and communities. These stories can be accessed on the FRIENDS website at: <https://friendsnrc.org/neglect-toolkit/neglect-videos>.

There is a wealth of information regarding structuring community dialogues with many resources listed at the end of this guide. Two such resources are:

- Liberating Structures offers a series of tools and rules meant to "invite participation and generate innovation." Liberating Structures (<http://www.liberatingstructures.com/design-elements/>) are used to facilitate organizational change, community transformation, and meaningful group discussions. (McCandless & Lipmanowicz, n.d.)
- The World Café model has been widely used in family strengthening settings and has been expanded to Community and Parent Cafés. Further information about the use of Community Cafés can be found here: <https://www.theworldcafe.com>.

The planning committee must also determine the logistics including the location, whether food will be served and childcare and transportation needs. A planning committee can also think about ways to ensure that the event is inclusive and provides



accommodations so that everyone can meaningfully participate. Information about meaningfully engaging parents can be found at the FRIENDS National Center website: <https://friendsnrc.org/parent-leadership>.

Inviting Participants

An important consideration for the planning committee is deciding whom to invite as participants. Who attends will affect the course of the conversation and its outcomes. The event will be richer if there are efforts to include a diverse group of participants that can offer a range of perspectives on the topic of child neglect prevention. If there are people whom the planning committee feels it is particularly important to include, they may want to consider personal outreach or other means of more direct invitation. The FRIENDS Collaboration Toolkit talks about the importance of investing time into informal relationships, for more information, visit <https://friendsnrc.org/activities-that-support-collaboration/collaboration-toolkit/informal-relationships>.

In his book, *Community: The Structure of Belonging*, Peter Block describes the invitation as “the decision to engage other citizens to be part of the possibility that we are committed to. The invitation is an act of generosity, and the mere act of inviting may have more meaning than anything that happens in the gathering.” (Block, 2008, 2009)



Holding the Event

All participants should be warmly welcomed as they arrive. The meeting should begin by clearly and concisely stating the purpose for bringing people together. It is important to make people feel welcomed by expressing gratitude for their time and acknowledging the host or other community leader instrumental in bringing the group together.

A conversation is so much more than words: a conversation is eyes, smiles, and the silence between words.

Annika Thor

Setting the Stage

- Guided discussions should be facilitated in a manner that is comfortable for all participants. Event planners/facilitators should reinforce that everyone is to be treated respectfully and listened to nonjudgmentally.
- Community and cultural norms should be considered when planning the event. These considerations include language, family composition, social habits, ethnicity, and faith.
- Discussion questions, event location, and food choices should be planned with community and cultural norms in mind.
- Be mindful that some participants may have low-level reading ability and may need to receive direction orally as well as in writing.
- Participants should be reminded that everyone is an expert about their own experiences and everyone's experiences should be valued.

Living Room Conversations, a national nonprofit which seeks to revitalize civil discourse through conversation, suggests these conversation guidelines: (https://www.livingroomconversations.org/conversation_agreements/)

Building Safety

Conversations about preventing child neglect can reveal sensitive experiences that participants may have faced or may still be dealing with. During the planning process, the planning committee should discuss how to respond when sensitive issues arise. Consider the following:

- Should the facilitator acknowledge at beginning of the event that the topic may stir strong emotions for some?
- Facilitator(s) should validate the person's experience by showing compassion and support.

- Identify one or more representatives from the community with experience dealing with emotional reactions to sensitive issues (family worker, social worker, health professional, etc.) to attend the event and be a resource to people during the event.
- Provide a list of local resources for children and families that can offer support related to child neglect.
- Connect participants with appropriate resources and follow-up after the event.

Conversation isn't about proving a point; true conversation is about going on a journey with the people you are speaking with.

-Ricky Maye

Initiating Discussion

The facilitator should provide an overview of the discussion process, explain the format of the discussion and emphasize that everyone in the room brings their own experiences and expertise. It may also be helpful to provide some contextual information and local data about child neglect and how it's impacting the community. You will find resources throughout this guide to assist with this. If small group discussion will be used during the course of the conversation, facilitators might consider offering the chance to practice active listening with a partner. Providing a brief description of what active listening is, and then using lighter, low-risk questions where the objective is simply practicing active listening, can help open up larger discussion and builds trust and safety among participants.

Child abuse and neglect data (by state) is available from the Children's Bureau, USDHHS at their website: <https://cwoutcomes.acf.hhs.gov/cwodatasite/new>

The Power of the Question

Conversations that engage participants and build collective wisdom usually encourage participants to reflect on a deeper level and focus on values and personal ideals related to the subject. Powerful questions can steer participants to think about something bigger than themselves and explore how they can connect and contribute. Well-constructed questions help participants feel that their contribution to the conversation is important and that their input is valued.

According to Juanita Brown, author of *The World Café: Shaping Our Futures through Conversations That Matter*, effective questions:

- are simple and clear
- are thought provoking
- generate energy
- focus inquiry
- open new possibilities
- surface assumption

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guide: “Building Community Commitment for Safe, Stable, Nurturing Relationships and Environments” contains some powerful ideas for preventing child abuse and neglect and could be used as a resource in the development of discussion questions. It can be found here: <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/efc-building-community-commitment.pdf>

Example Questions

- What would it take to create change on this issue?
- What’s been your major insight or learning so far?
- What assumptions do we need to challenge related to preventing child neglect?

For more guidance on developing questions, see *The Art of Powerful Questions: Catalyzing Insight, Innovation and Action* (2003) by E. Vogt, J. Brown, and D. Isaacs.



Facilitation Tips

A facilitator should highlight themes of the discussion and keep the group focused on the discussion’s purpose without sacrificing important points that may be raised that are outside the scope the planners originally envisioned. Other considerations to promote effective facilitation are highlighted below.

- Create a relaxed, safe and welcoming environment for participants.
- Review ground rules and invite participants to modify if necessary.
- Create opportunities for everyone to participate in the conversation.
- Assist with group process which includes not allowing anyone to dominate the conversation or by asking follow-up questions if participants are quiet for a while.
- Help keep the conversation focused and on track and remind participants of the topic and questions being discussed.
- Allow space for pauses and silence, recognizing that participants may need time to process and reflect.
- Reinforce the importance of everyone's contributions to the discussion.

The Community Tool box offers more information on facilitating here: <https://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/leadership/group-facilitation/group-discussions/main>

Reflection/Harvest

After the conversation(s) have been completed, it's important for all participants and facilitators to take some time to reflect on insights, themes, patterns and possible next steps. A need for additional conversations that involve asking deeper questions or focus on an important aspect of the discussion may be revealed.

This time of reflection is sometimes called the harvest and can be an opportunity to examine the collective wisdom that has been uncovered during the discussion. During the harvest or reflection, the facilitator can lead the discussion about any key issues and insights that surfaced during the discussion and a recorder can note themes and potential action steps on a flip chart or white board.

Closing Meeting

The facilitator can conclude the meeting by inviting final reflections, summarizing outcomes, or sharing information about next steps. This can be a time to acknowledge hosts or community partners that helped the discussion happen. Identifying community resources to which participants can connect may also be helpful.

After the Event

After the discussion, the planning team should meet to debrief the discussion and identify issues that surfaced as possible action steps. The planning team should consider whether to plan an additional conversation or how to engage in planned or unanticipated next steps. It can be helpful to evaluate what went well, and what could have gone better. If goals were set for evaluating the success or impact of the event, these should be reviewed. A website called the Meeting Hero offers these strategies to evaluate meetings. <https://themeetinghero.com/5-easy-ways-to-evaluate-your-meeting/>

Consider contacting participants to thank them for their participation, to share notes from the discussion and announce next steps. If items for immediate follow-up were identified, an update can be provided.

Resource List

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