



Information Sheet

Engagement tools

It is important for Early Years Networks to inform and engage with the Early Years Network membership.

While many members may be comfortable engaging in conversation and providing feedback, engagement needs to be culturally appropriate and accessible to all members, in order to be representative.

There are a number of tools and methods which can be used to engage with community members.

Information is provided on:

- focus groups
- effective brainstorming
- community surveys
- strengths-based questioning.

Focus groups

A focus group is a qualitative research technique that supports and stimulates participants to explore issues, feelings, and opinions more widely and deeply than is usually possible in a structured interview or formal public meeting.

A focus group is best used to:

- obtain a range of opinions/perceptions on a theme
- identify strengths and weaknesses in programs/services
- inform decisions about where to make improvements
- stimulate new ideas
- interpret research and surveys
- inform policy decisions.

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Factors that maximise successful outcomes for focus groups:

- an interviewer/facilitator who is knowledgeable about the subject material and skilled in group facilitation
- a relaxed informal atmosphere
- a clearly defined purpose and objectives for the meeting
- limited participant numbers (seven to nine)
- a round-table seating configuration
- a predetermined format with a set of structured questions
- questions that are open-ended, focused, move from the general to the specific and are simple and comprehensible
- acknowledgement of the value of participants
- an agreed time arrangement
- focussed discussions
- interaction between participants
- shared input from all participants
- an open format which encourages innovative thinking
- a scribe who is not participating in the discussion
- regular summaries of the conversation.

Effective brainstorming

Brainstorming is useful for:

- generating lots of ideas in a short period
- encouraging lateral and creative thinking
- expanding, piggy backing or 'leap frogging' on the ideas of others
- helping participants to temporarily suspend judgement or criticism
- helping shy individuals to participate more freely.

Rules for brainstorming:

- participants come with an open mind
- all ideas are good ideas – start by listing every idea the group comes up with

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- keep ideas short
- encourage creativity. All ideas are valued
- combine and build on ideas.

How to set up a brainstorming session:

- Identify the issue, question, or problem for discussion. It can be helpful to record the issue as 'How might we?'. Explain the issue, question or problem to the group.
- Divide groups of more than 10 participants into smaller groups.
- Select a person to list ideas on a whiteboard or flip chart for each group.
- Explain the purpose and rules of brainstorming.
- Brainstorm responses to the identified issue, question, or problem. All ideas should be recorded. Start by asking for one idea from each participant.
- Analyse and discuss unfamiliar ideas (but be careful of stopping the flow).
- Establish criteria for selecting the best ideas. It can be helpful to have the group members vote (e.g. use sticky dots to put against the best ideas or ask participants to tick the ideas they like the best).
- Explore the best ideas (top 3-5) in more detail. Generate action plans for the ideas chosen or allocate this task to a smaller working group.

Community surveys

A community survey considers the relevance and usefulness of facilities and services for families and children. Surveys give a 'snapshot' of the current situation in a community and help Early Years Network members to identify and decide on which project to undertake. Surveys can also show to what existing initiatives are achieving or where they can be improved.

Surveys are typically used to:

- identify specific community resources and needs
- measure community attitudes
- measure whether a project is likely to gain support
- identify new ideas
- measure the progress or success of an initiative
- create publicity or community interest in a new initiative.

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Before beginning a survey:

- Have a clear purpose for the survey and decide how the information will be used and processed.
- Where possible, involve people in the community with appropriate skills (marketing professionals, local council staff or students) or consult community-support organisations.
- Keep it simple. Two or three small surveys may give better results than one large complex survey.
- Design the survey questions with the end data in mind. Open ended questions provide interesting insight but ratings (1-5, most valuable – least valuable) are easier to analyse.
- Estimate the resources needed to undertake the survey in terms of people, money, time, and data processing. Sometimes universities are prepared to provide support for implementation of a survey as a learning opportunity for students.
- Choose the most appropriate way of conducting the survey, for example, face-to-face, email, text, distributing questionnaires and/or telephone. Consider whose opinions or ideas you are seeking and how they are most likely to respond.
- Test the survey questions to make sure they are clear and easily understood by the people targeted. Confirm that the answers invited provide the information sought.
- Minimise the number of survey questions.
- Ensure the introduction highlights the benefits of the survey and encourages people to take part.
- Consider ways to publicise the survey before launching it.

After the survey is completed, provide feedback and a summary of the findings. Surveys can raise community interest in an idea or possible initiative and the benefits are best appreciated if results are published in a timely manner.

How can we achieve this?

Example questions are listed below:

1. What services might families with young children need?
 - What formal services might families need e.g. maternal and child health services, childcare, pre-schools?
 - What informal services might families need e.g. playgroups, mother's groups?
 - What facilities might families use e.g. shopping centres, cafes/restaurants, transport, recreational (parks, playgrounds, swimming pools), resources (libraries, toy libraries)?
2. How accessible are these services and facilities?
 - How physically accessible are they?
 - Are there any eligibility restrictions for these services? Are they universal or targeted services?
 - What does it cost to use them? Are they free, means-tested or fee charging?
3. Are there meeting places for families of young children?
 - Where do these families meet?
 - How many meeting places for families are there in the community?
 - Which meeting places are dedicated family venues or facilities, if any?
4. Are the service facilities and venues family friendly?
 - Which places are physically attractive to families with young children?
 - Which places are clean and safe?
 - Which places are run in a family-centred way?
5. How well do the various services work together?
 - Are the formal services available linked/integrated with one another?
 - Are the formal services and informal community services linked/integrated?

Strengths-based questioning

Strengths-based questioning can be a useful way to explore the needs of the community and to identify the strengths to build on.

When using strengths-based questioning, you are seeking a vision of the future where the issues are improved or resolved.

Strengths-based questioning can focus on:

- the strengths of the community as a whole
- hopes for the future
- individual or service strengths.

When using strengths-based questioning, you can ask questions like:

- What is the best thing about this community?
- What helps children get a great start in this community?
- If you could wish for anything to change in our community, what would it be?

It is important to use strengths-based questions in the context of:

- being purposeful and positive
- being future focussed but interested in the past
- looking for the strengths and successes to build upon
- acknowledging that everyone has different experiences.

More information

To find out more about Early Years Networks, please visit our website or contact:

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