COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS PLANNING GUIDE

This Community Conversations Planning Guide has been designed specifically to be used with the Issue Guide *Looking for Answers Together*.

*Looking for Answers Together*
How Should We Nurture Children to Be Healthy and Make Better Choices?

Parent Information Action Research Project
An Issue Guide
Community Conversations about Education

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Community Conversations about Education has supported Connecticut communities since 1993. Original support materials, created in partnership with Public Agenda and the Institute for Educational Leadership, have been adapted over time to respond to community needs.

These current support materials were designed specifically to be used with the Issue Guide, *Looking for Answers Together: How Should We Nurture Children to Be Healthy and Make Better Choices?* A learning partnership with the William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund, the Parent Information Inquiry Initiative (Parentii) of the Institute for Translational Research at the University of Hartford, and the Kettering Foundation supported the recent modifications.

Community Conversations would like to acknowledge the contributors to this joint learning process:

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BACKGROUND

THIS PLANNING GUIDE is designed for communities who plan to host a community conversation and use the 2013 Issue Guide on the topic: Looking for Answers Together: How Should We Nurture Children to be Healthy and Make Better Choices? Planning this event takes considerable work but it is also an opportunity to meet people who share concerns about nurturing young children.

Connecting parents, those with primary responsibility for young children, and others in the community to information about early childhood is key to young children’s success. Parents who have access to quality information and the supports to use that information can make better decisions regarding children. Ten Connecticut parents and faculty at the University of Hartford spent two years listening to parents, community members, and people like you across the state of Connecticut and then creating this specific Issue Guide.

This planner can help you by guiding the local planning committee through the process step-by-step. While Community Conversations about Education has supported hundreds of conversations in Connecticut cities and towns, these particular materials were formatted to use with the Issue Guide uniquely created by the Parent Information Action Research Project Parent Researchers, led by Dr. Paige M. Bray, University of Hartford.

The Issue Guide and the Community Conversation format are tools for respectful discussions, characterized by full and diverse participation, where real questions are asked, time is shared, and mutual listening and learning happen. They are opportunities for communities to discover ways to encourage all constituents to work together on a common issue—in this case, How Should We Nurture Children to be Healthy and Make Better Choices?

The conversation model works. Community conversations:

• Provide opportunities for participants from diverse backgrounds to speak openly with each other in a safe setting;
• Invite participants to voice personal views through the process of dialogue and deliberation;
• Encourage community members to consider what they might do individually or what they would like to see the community do to address this issue.
Your first task is to **create a planning committee**. You need a diverse group of about 20 planners to make your community conversation richer and your invitation process much easier. Include a mix of people who represent your community: parents, old timers and newcomers, educators, clergy, employers, students, local government officials, and seniors.

At the first full meeting of the planning committee you will **set a tentative date** for your event. You will want to check school and local government calendars to choose a time that does not conflict with significant events, avoiding, for instance, the town-wide soccer tournament or high school graduation.

**Conversation Description:**

This conversation should be scheduled for approximately three and a half hours, including time for a light meal, opening remarks, small group discussion, and closing. Participants might gather for a light dinner on a weeknight, or breakfast on a Saturday morning. The meal is followed by a brief introduction. As far as possible your attendees should represent the diversity of the community. A trained moderator guides each small group discussion and trained recorders ensure that participants’ ideas and comments are accurately documented.

**Goals for Community Conversations:**

The overarching goal is to promote rich and productive discussion among a representative cross-section of the community. Specific objectives are to:

- Advance understanding and broaden the perspectives of all stakeholders—parents, students, employers, educators, civic leaders, and members of the general public—by providing a neutral setting in which they can come together, interact with one another, and share their views.

- Engage in the discussion members of the community who are not typically involved in conversations about nurturing young children.
• Generate conversations that begin with the public’s starting point as much as with that of experts. This issue guide was written by parents from communities across Connecticut who spoke with over a hundred people, including parents and other community members.

• Give participants an opportunity to consider several options—each with its own set of possible actions and drawbacks.

• Help participants think and talk through basic values, concerns, and assumptions that underlie their views.

• Help participants consider any insights, surprises, or “aha’s.”

• Raise important issues and questions, and provide participants with new information, contacts, and resources they can use in future deliberations.

Discussion Structure:

The Issue Guide presents three options that have been carefully crafted to be fair and balanced, and to elicit stimulating and productive dialogue. They are not meant to offer all the alternatives possible on this topic of nurturing young children, but to be helpful conversation starters that stimulate participants to sort through what is most important to them in their own local community.

Organizing the discussion around options helps the conversation by:

• Establishing a common reference point for participants and keeping the discussion focused;

• Steering the conversation away from a narrow, technical discussion of the issues toward a broader discussion of goals, priorities, and values implied by the options;

• Giving the participants an opportunity to consider different perspectives side by side, listening fully to the advantages and drawbacks, and different values, of each option;

• Expanding people’s perspectives, giving them an opportunity to question their initial thinking and perceptions;

• Helping participants become more realistic when considering the issues. People realize that there is no one perfect solution and that each alternative comes with certain costs and tradeoffs. By working with options, participants gain a better understanding of the complexity of these issues and the need, ultimately, to make a decision among imperfect solutions;

• Putting people into the role of active problem solvers, as opposed to passively reacting to solutions offered by experts. The options present real-world scenarios that participants, through the help of the moderator, can apply to their own community.
Option 1 Parents and Neighbors Should Take More Responsibility (Issue Guide p. 17)

Parents and Neighbors Should Take More Responsibility

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actions</th>
<th>Drawbacks</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Family members and neighbors can speak up when they notice unacceptable behavior and take action to support parents’ responsible efforts on behalf of their children.</td>
<td>Family and neighbors do not want to judge one other. They may not always know the whole story and are concerned about the consequences of interference.</td>
</tr>
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<td>• State and local government can mandate character education for parents and children.</td>
<td>We run the risk of trampling on parents’ rights to raise their children as they see fit.</td>
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<td>• Places of worship and cultural and community organizations can offer mentoring for model behavior from others in the community.</td>
<td>Model behavior doesn’t mean the same thing to everyone; culture, family, and regional ways influence what a parent does.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Schools can require parenting classes as early as middle school, before dropout rates and most teen parenting occurs.</td>
<td>Schools will be taking on work once done by families, which means less time to teach academic subjects.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Businesses can establish paid apprenticeships (starting below minimum wage and gradually moving beyond) to help youths and young parents learn responsibility and civic engagement.</td>
<td>Because businesses are usually intent on saving costs, authentic learning apprenticeships may well turn into rote work.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Reproduced from Looking for Answers Together: How Should We Nurture Children to be Healthy and Make Better Choices?
## Option 2 Make Families a Top Priority (Issue Guide p. 18)

### Make Time for Families a Top Priority

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Actions</th>
<th>Drawbacks</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• State and local governments can make flexible, affordable, quality child care available for all families on a sliding scale.</td>
<td>Staffing and regulating a system of quality child-care centers will place a considerable burden on communities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Businesses can provide more flex-time and family leave time.</td>
<td>Businesses might have to cut other benefits or reduce wages.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Parents can talk to each other and to members of an older generation to seek support and advice for daily challenges.</td>
<td>Making time for these conversations, when parents have so little time anyway, may be more burdensome than helpful.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Schools could extend the school day or the calendar year, and offer affordable after-school child care.</td>
<td>Children would spend more time away from their families. More time in child-care programs may result in lowering parenting standards and letting parents “off the hook.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Families and communities can make use of the extensive information available about the needs of children, nutrition, early brain development, and literacy.</td>
<td>Too much information causes parents to throw up their hands and opt out.</td>
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Reproduced from *Looking for Answers Together: How Should We Nurture Children to be Healthy and Make Better Choices?*

Guarantee Every Child’s Basic Needs Are Met

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<th>Actions</th>
<th>Drawbacks</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• State and federal governments could provide access to preventative public health and free or affordable health care for every child.</td>
<td>Making sure every child gets health care would mean more government involvement in family life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Communities can provide reliable evening and weekend public transportation.</td>
<td>To get a critical mass of riders to make public transit economically feasible, people would have to make less use of their cars, which means less flexibility and convenience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Volunteers and nonprofit groups can combat illiteracy and dropout rates by reading to every child from birth and teaching family literacy skills.</td>
<td>This could intrude on family life and could complicate the relationship between children and their parents.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Comprehensive schools can break the cycle of illiteracy and underemployment with programs that guarantee parent education through at least high school.</td>
<td>This means building a costly bureaucracy to ensure that people complete an education that the public is already giving them for free.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Congress can legislate equal pay for women, which would be particularly helpful to single mothers.</td>
<td>If we force employers to raise pay for women, they may not be able to hire as many people, including other women.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Government, communities, and businesses should work together to ensure that parents have access to health care, mental health support, and job-training opportunities.</td>
<td>Giving people a job, good health care, and other resources doesn’t mean they’ll be good parents.</td>
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SAMPLE CONVERSATIONS AGENDAS

EVENING COMMUNITY CONVERSATION (5:30-9:00)

5:30  **Registration and Light Supper**

6:00  **Introduction** *(about 20 minutes, LEAD MODERATOR)*
- Welcome and Explanation of process
- If you are using a PowerPoint, show it at this time
- Send participants to small groups
  (One person stays at registration table to register any latecomers)

6:30  **Small Group Discussion** *(TRAINED SMALL GROUP MODERATORS)*

  **Opening** *(10 minutes)*
  - Welcome
  - Go around circle and introduce by role (not job)
  - Highlight posted agenda and guidelines

  **Discussion** *(80 minutes)*
  - Introduce topic and consider each option

  **Summary** *(15 minutes)*
  - Insights, Aha’s and Surprises
  - Questions

  **Next Steps** *(15 minutes)*

  **Back to Large Group**

8:30  **Wrap up** *(about 30 minutes, LEAD MODERATOR)*

  - Share summary findings from each small group
  - Ask participants to fill out survey
  - Thank planning committee, hosts, and others as appropriate
SATURDAY MORNING
COMMUNITY CONVERSATION (9:00-12:30)

9:00 Registration and Continental Breakfast

9:30 Introduction (about 20 minutes, LEAD MODERATOR)
   Welcome and Explanation of process
   If you are using a PowerPoint, show it at this time
   Send participants to small groups
   (One person stays at registration table to register any latecomers)

10:00 Small Group Discussion (TRAINED SMALL GROUP MODERATORS)
   120 minutes
   Opening (10 minutes)
   Welcome
   Go around circle and introduce by role (not job)
   Highlight posted agenda and guidelines
   Discussion (80 minutes)
   Introduce topic and consider each option
   Summary (15 minutes)
   Insights, Aha’s and Surprises
   Questions
   Next Steps (15 minutes)

Back to Large Group

12:00 Wrap up (about 30 minutes, LEAD MODERATOR)
   Share summary findings from each small group
   Ask participants to fill out survey
   Thank planning committee, hosts, and others as appropriate
PLANNING COMMITTEE TASKS

Task Check List

Note: This list will help you get started but you may want to include other activities as part of your community conversation. You will need several weeks to plan your event. You may meet together as a committee of the whole or create sub-committees to handle the arrangements.

- **Pick a date** that does not conflict with any major community activities. Someone on the planning committee should be responsible for checking local calendars of events to avoid conflicts. The planning committee will decide whether to hold the conversation on a weekday night or a Saturday morning or other time. There is no perfect time. Different people will be able to come at different times. The best time is what works for your community.

- **Choose a safe, well lit site** with parking. Finding an appropriate site is important to support objectives of the conversation. Sites should be well known and easily accessible. Many planning committees have used public schools but other suitable venues include libraries, universities, private schools and community centers. You will need a large room for your meal, such as a school cafeteria where you will hold your large group discussion. You will need approximately five breakout rooms for the small group discussions. Here you should arrange seats in a circle or horseshoe so participants can all make eye contact. You will need convenient wall space to post the flip-chart sheets as the conversation develops. Windows or crowded bulletin boards can make this difficult. If you are planning to use an elementary or pre-school setting, be sure to set up a room with adult-sized chairs for the conversation. And you will need a safe place for child care. Parking facilities should easily accommodate the number of participants and should be clearly marked and well lit for evening events. Post signs to direct participants to the most convenient entry.

- **Select moderators and recorders** whom Community Conversations will train. Skilled moderators are key to making the conversation a success, determining in large part the quality of the experience. Moderators should be comfortable speaking to diverse groups of strangers. They should be able to manage the participants’ conflicting
positions and ideas. They must be viewed as neutral and impartial, not associated with a particular viewpoint. It is advisable to have moderators and recorders who reflect the demographics of the community. Consider training novice moderators. That way you will have a group with new skills to lead other public meetings. The recorder works along with the moderator. The recorder’s notes are the only record of the small groups’ discussions. Recorders are expected to attend the moderator training. They should be reasonable spellers with clear handwriting.

• **Create an invitation list and recruit participants.** Ask each member of the planning committee to submit names from their own constituencies to bring together a diverse group of about 100 for your conversation. (You will want to invite many more to get 100 participants.) You may decide to also announce the event in the press and ask that interested residents telephone members of the planning committee for information. Walk-ins are generally few in number and can be accommodated at the last minute. In order to have the voices of some groups, for instance, youth, you may need more intentional outreach to be sure they feel the importance of their contribution. Reminder calls just before the event are helpful.

• **Design an invitation** with a tear off for the RSVP and request for special requirements such as translators, child care, wheelchair ramp, etc.

• **Arrange for printing, mailing, or electronic outreach and a central site to gather RSVPs.** Follow up RSVPs with reminder phone calls.

• **Engage interpreters**, if necessary. The Issue Guide and support materials are available in English and in Spanish.

• **Arrange for child care.** In order to accommodate young families, it is important to plan safe and engaging activities for children during the community conversation. When creating your invitation, include an RSVP to obtain the ages of children who will be attending while their parents participate in the community conversation.

• **Select a caterer** or other way to feed 100 participants. A continental breakfast or light supper is usually served. It is best to keep the food arrangements simple and to consider a vegetarian option. Conversations held in the morning should offer hot and cold beverages for the wrap-up session. Conversations planned for the evening may reserve dessert and coffee for the wrap-up session.
• **Arrange for transportation for those who need it.**

• **Determine equipment, supplies, and technology needs.** Each small group room should have a full flip-chart pad on an easel and a supply of dark markers. Although they are expensive, flip-chart-sized Post-It pads are recommended. Otherwise, use painter’s masking tape that will not damage walls when the recorder posts the conversation notes. Those using the PowerPoint conversation starter need a computer and projector to show the presentation to the large group.

• **Prepare participant materials,** including Issue Guide and the Participant Survey (Appendix B).

• **Signs.** Distinct signs to direct participants to the large group meeting and the small group discussion rooms will make the transitions between sessions go smoothly and quickly. Conversation signs should be easily distinguished from other signs in the facility. Prepare signs giving directions to restroom facilities and to and from parking. Some communities post large outdoor signs at the parking lot entrance and at nearby intersections. Be aware of any specific challenges posed by the facility and prepare signs to assist your participants.

• **Registration.** A table should be set up where participants enter. If the registration area is at a distance from the building entrance, post signs to show the way. At registration, participants should be given a name tag, the issue guide and participant survey and a pen/pencil. Gather each participant’s name, address, email address, and phone number on sign-in sheets. Make sure that there are enthusiastic people at the registration table who are able to answer basic questions about the community conversation and the Issue Guide. The planning committee will decide how to handle walk-ins.

• **Compile and submit a site report** of the event, using recorders’ notes. (See Appendix C.)

• **Establish and Announce a Follow-Up Meeting.** Participants often want to act on the conversation. We encourage you to plan to meet with anyone interested in following up on the conversation and sharing your findings. Please plan on a meeting date several weeks after the conversation itself. You’ll want to announce the date for the follow-up at the conversation itself.
EQUIPMENT CHECKLIST

Very little special equipment is needed. The checklist below will help you plan for the meeting.

REGISTRATION

• Sign-in Sheet
• Long table and chairs for staff
• Name tags for participants, and pens or pencils
• Participant Folders, including Issue Guide and Participant Survey

LARGE GROUP

• Meal set-up
• Podium
• PowerPoint equipment

REFRESHMENTS

• A light meal should be served, along with beverages. Let people know in the invitation that food will be available. A continental breakfast is adequate for a Saturday morning.

SMALL DISCUSSION ROOM

• Flip-charts, markers (dark colors), masking tape (unless flip-charts are “Post-It”)
• Chairs (preferably without a desk) set up in a circle or horseshoe
• Prepare and post on walls of each small group flip chart sheets for Agenda, Conversation Guidelines, Reflections, and Questions and Concerns (see Appendix A)
## APPENDIX A: Small Group Room Set-up

Please print the following on separate flip chart sheets a post on the walls:

### AGENDA

| 1. Introductions & Guidelines (10 min.) |
| 2. Discussion (about 30 minutes each) |
| • Option 1 |
| • Option 2 |
| • Option 3 |
| 3. Summary (15 minutes) |
| • Reflections |
| • Questions and concerns |
| 4. Next Steps (15 minutes) |
| 5. Return to large group |

*Remember to fill out surveys*

### CONVERSATION GUIDELINES

- Speak for yourself; participate as equals
- Listen carefully and with respect; one
- Respect others’ opinions
- Everyone has an opportunity to speak
- Agree to disagree; disagree with ideas not with people
- Stay focused
- Silence phones

### REFLECTIONS

(Insights, “Ahas,” Surprises)

(post on wall)

### QUESTIONS & CONCERNS

(post on wall)

### NEXT STEPS

(What can I do as a result of today’s conversation?)

What could the community do?)

(post on wall)
APPENDIX B: Sample Participant Survey

This survey is the final step in today’s community conversation. It will provide valuable feedback to the community planning team about how to have more successful conversations, how to plan a follow up meeting, and how this experience leads to individual and community action.

Name of your small discussion group: ____________________________ Date: __________

The conversation experience

1. What was it like to take part in this conversation?

2. How was this different than your other community experiences?

3. How would you improve it?

4. How effective were the moderators? Why do you feel that way?

5. Were the leaders/moderators of this conversation parent leaders? If so, how did this influence your experience?

The issue

6. Do you think differently about the issue of nurturing children as a result of attending this conversation?

7. Is there anything you might do differently after being part of this conversation?

(Continued on next page)
8. Are there any aspects of this conversation that might be helpful to you and others in your role as parent, parent leader or community member?

Demographics

9. What is your gender?

10. What is your race/ethnicity?

11. Are you the parent or primary caregiver of children birth to age 8?
   - Yes
   - No

The Future

12. Please list any individuals or organizations that you would want to be part of this conversation.

13. Is there anything else you would like us to know about how you can use, access, create, or promote parent information?

14. In what way(s) might you, and/or others in the community be involved in follow-up to this meeting? (These could be people from schools, government, community organizations, or groups of concerned citizens.)

15. Are there other issues that are of particular importance to discuss in your community? If so, please indicate which one(s).
APPENDIX C: Sample Site Report

(This Site Report form can help communities reflect on their conversations to improve future efforts.)

COMMUNITY CONVERSATION SITE REPORT FORM

Community: ___________________________________________ Conversation date: _____________

Conversation location: _____________________________________________________________

# Attendees: _________ # Small Groups __________

Did the location work well for your Conversation? Why/why not?

What approaches worked well to attract participants? What barriers were encountered?

How well did your participants represent the diverse segments of your community? Please give examples to describe the diverse participation.

What were the three (3) best things that happened at your Conversation?

What were the three (3) most difficult things about your Conversation?

What action steps evolved out of your Conversation?

When is your follow-up meeting?

Date: ___________ Time:_____________ Location:_________________________________________
You may want to keep a record of the following:

**PLANNING COMMITTEE MEMBERS:**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Affiliation</th>
<th>Phone#</th>
<th>Email#</th>
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**MODERATORS:**

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<th>Affiliation</th>
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**RECORDERS:**

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**Small Group Discussion Summary:**

Here are some thoughts and questions you might ask yourselves about the small group discussions:

*What common themes and ideas came out in more than one group and capture important unique ideas?*

**PARTICIPATION:** *How were small groups set up? Were any special considerations taken in organizing the discussion groups?* (Examples of “special considerations”: ensuring that grandparents were represented in every discussion group, or offering an option for participants with limited English proficiency to choose native language discussion group.)

**ISSUES:** *What major themes emerged across the small discussion groups?*

**QUESTIONS AND CONCERNS:** *What questions did participants raise? What information does the community need to know? Did some participants have information in response to other participants’ questions? What kinds of information did participants share?*

**IDEAS AND ACTION STEPS:** *What specific suggestions were given? What next steps are participants willing to support? What commitments are participants willing to make to help implement changes?*

**FINAL SUMMARY:** *What did you learn about improving communities and meeting the needs of children and families?*