

# Session 2: How can you gather information about how the system is helping and hindering your outcomes?

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## Contents

**Introduction.....2**

**Step 1: Set Boundaries .....4**

    What outcomes are showing the biggest disparities in the data? ..... 4

    What outcome(s) do families and partners prioritize? ..... 5

**Step 2: Ask Questions.....6**

    Ecosystem Leverage Points..... 6

    What have you already learned about ecosystem leverage points? ..... 8

    Which ecosystem leverage point questions do you still need to ask? ..... 8

    Who can answer your questions? ..... 11

    What methods could you use to engage these perspectives? ..... 12

    How will you gather information from relevant data sources? ..... 18

    Overall method considerations ..... 19

**References ..... 21**

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# Introduction

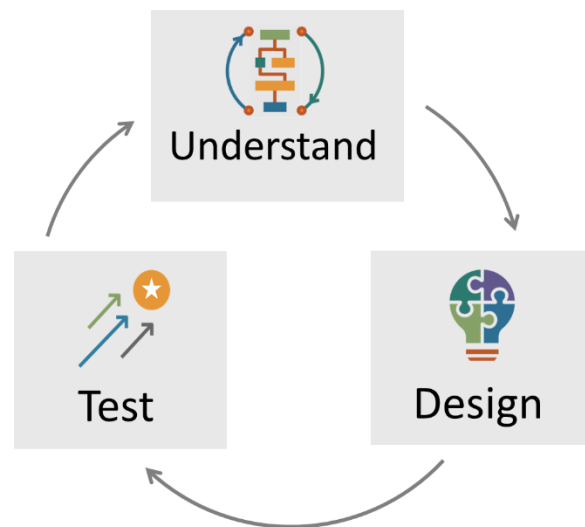
Albert Einstein once said, “If I had an hour to solve a problem, I’d spend 55 minutes thinking about the problem and 5 minutes thinking about solutions.” Like Einstein, effective collaborative groups ask questions to deeply understand the systems they are aiming to transform before jumping to solutions.

Understanding a system, or ecosystem, involves asking questions to understand how conditions within programs, organizations, systems, and communities are helping and hindering your outcomes. This information informs where to intervene to create change and how to design systems change strategies. Strategies that are intentionally designed to address the interacting leverage points affecting your outcomes are more likely to bring about sustainable, equitable changes for children and families.<sup>1,4</sup>

There are many approaches to understand how community systems are affecting outcomes, such as community health assessment, needs assessment, etc. This session describes an approach focused on understanding *system* conditions affecting prioritized outcomes. The process involves gathering information from different perspectives (e.g., families, leaders and staff from cross-sector organizations, community members, etc.) and relevant data sources using feasible yet culturally responsive methods.

This process can inform a larger continuous action learning cycle where groups work to:

- 1) UNDERSTAND system conditions or “leverage points” that are helping and hindering outcomes for children and families.
- 2) DESIGN strategies to amplify what is working and address what is not.
- 3) TEST out these strategies in real world situations.
- 4) Gather rapid/short cycle feedback to UNDERSTAND whether strategies are working and why, so they can be either scaled or re-DESIGNED.



This action learning cycle is well suited for multi-level system change efforts and builds on common approaches to community change including popular education<sup>2</sup> and participatory action research<sup>3</sup>. It is also similar to other continuous quality improvement approaches (e.g., Plan Do Study Act cycles) which many groups already use for program and operational improvements.

## Session Outline

The “Understand” phase of the action learning cycle shown on the prior page has 3 steps.

- **Step 1** focuses on setting boundaries around the ecosystem you are hoping to understand.
- **Step 2** identifies questions to ask about important ecosystem leverage points affecting your outcomes and associated disparities and the methods to ask these questions with diverse perspectives and data sources.
- **Step 3** supports groups in mapping out themes in the information you are gathering and prioritizing where to focus for strategy design.

This session guide is focused on steps 1 and 2 in this process. The next session will focus on step 3.

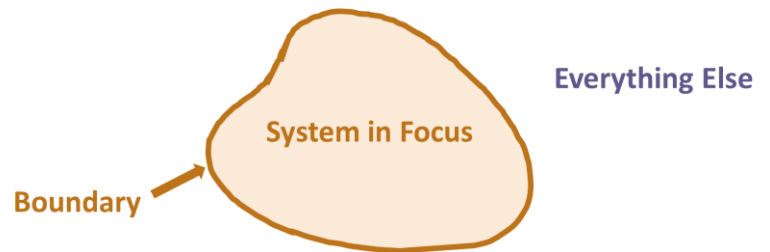
# Understand





# Step 1: Set Boundaries

If you remember from session 1, boundaries determine what aspects of the (eco)system are the focus of your efforts, and what aspects are not. Some systems theorists argue that establishing boundaries is a critical first step for effective systems change.<sup>7</sup>



The following are several questions to help your group determine boundaries around the system you would like to understand to inform strategy design. See session 1 for additional questions.

## What outcomes are showing the biggest disparities in the data?

What outcomes are showing the biggest need *and* disparities in your region when looking at the data? Remember, a disparity is a gap between groups experiencing the best and worst outcomes. Focusing on understanding how systems are reinforcing disparities is a great way to center equity within your change efforts.

### Example Outcomes

- Kindergarten readiness
- Child abuse and neglect
- Substance abuse
- Housing stability
- Access to mental health resources
- Youth suicide

Look at *disaggregated* data for your region to help uncover outcome disparities. Disaggregated data shows outcomes across multiple population groups with different demographic characteristics such as:

- Race/Ethnicity
- Income-level
- Education Level
- Age
- System involvement
- Gender, gender identity
- Sexual orientation/LGBTQ+ status
- Geographic location
- Urbanicity (% of location considered urban)
- Household (two-parent, single parent, grandparent caregiver, foster home, etc.)

One way to understand disparities is to calculate a **disparity ratio**. This involves comparing people from demographic groups (e.g., race/ethnicity, income-level, etc.) showing the lowest level of your outcome to the average of that outcome for all other groups.



See this [tool](#) for guidance around calculating disparity ratios.

## What outcome(s) do families and partners prioritize?

Convene parents/caregivers from groups experiencing the biggest disparities across your outcomes and relevant partners to reflect on the data you have gathered and help decide which outcome inequity is most urgent to focus on (at least to start with).

**Note:** depending on partners' capacity to authentically engage parents from priority populations, you may consider engaging these two groups separately and then bringing their input together.

Use this example criteria to help families and partners determine which outcome to prioritize.

	Of the outcome(s) showing large need/disparities in your region...
Impact on Families	Which do families say need to change the most because of the impact on their lives?
Local Momentum	Which has some momentum across the region, shown by people and organizations starting to speak out, organize, and take actions?
Need for Action	Which is not adequately being addressed within the region by other initiatives or collaborative groups?



## Step 2: Ask Questions

Outcomes and associated disparities are affected by conditions within the ecosystems in which children, youth, and families live, work and play. What questions are most important to ask to understand the conditions affecting your prioritized outcome and associated disparities?

The following section provides ideas for how to select powerful questions to ask about your ecosystem.

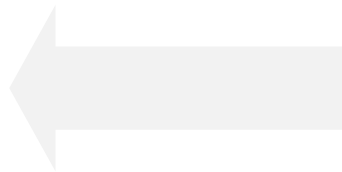
### Ecosystem Leverage Points

**Ecosystem leverage points** are conditions – such as policies, mindsets, and decision-making processes - within organizations, service delivery systems, and regions that are helping and hindering your outcomes and contributing to disparities. The next page shows a list of leverage points affecting most outcomes.

When changed, some leverage points have more power to trigger ripple effects on other leverage points across the ecosystem (see the table on next page).<sup>4</sup> You can strategically focus your efforts on shifting higher leverage points to create more transformative systems change in your region and/or state.



Higher leverage points are like boulders that create big ripple effects when changed, leading to more sustainable changes than lower leverage point conditions.



Lower leverage points are like smaller pebbles. They are still essential, but generally create less sustainable changes that do not reverberate very far across the ecosystem.

#### Main Takeaway

Ask questions to understand which leverage points are helping and hindering your outcome and reinforcing inequities so you can use this information to help design strategies.

## Ecosystem Leverage Point Definitions

The following are example leverage points that affect most outcomes and can be seen at organizational, community, regional, state, and national levels. **More powerful leverage points are listed towards the top of this table.**



	Leverage Point Conditions	Examples	Keywords
PARADIGMS	 <b>Mindsets:</b> Beliefs, values, narratives, assumptions, and attitudes that create a way of viewing reality for people who share them	Many in the region do not value the role early care and education plays in child development and the local economy.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Value</li> <li>• Attitude</li> <li>• Culture</li> <li>• Narrative</li> <li>• Feel</li> </ul> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perception</li> <li>• Believe</li> <li>• Trust</li> <li>• Assume</li> <li>• Priority</li> </ul>
	 <b>Goals:</b> Stated and unstated aims, targeted outcomes, and purpose of organizations, initiatives, and systems - including accountability mechanisms	Local organizations have prioritized outcomes around reducing disparities in child and family outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Goals</li> <li>• Outcomes</li> <li>• Targets</li> <li>• Aims</li> <li>• Purpose</li> </ul> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Impact</li> <li>• Mission</li> <li>• Benchmarks</li> <li>• Measurement</li> <li>• Accountability</li> </ul>
STRUCTURES	 <b>Decision-Making:</b> How decisions are made, and who is included/excluded	Few families have influence in local decisions about how programs and policies are designed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Decisions</li> <li>• Power</li> <li>• Input</li> <li>• Influence</li> </ul> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Membership</li> <li>• Family voice</li> <li>• Behind closed doors</li> <li>• “Never listens to __”</li> </ul>
	 <b>Policies and Practices:</b> Formal and informal policies, practices, protocols, procedures, laws, standards, and norms	Some quality rating standards are not responsive to home-based and/or culturally diverse child care settings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Policies</li> <li>• Standards</li> <li>• Practices</li> <li>• Procedures</li> <li>• Eligibility</li> <li>• Legislation</li> </ul> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Laws/regulations</li> <li>• Routine</li> <li>• HIPAA, FERPA</li> <li>• “Not allowed”</li> <li>• “This is how we’ve always done it”</li> </ul>
	 <b>Connections:</b> Exchanges of information, referrals, learning, and resources between people and organizations	Data/information is being shared between cross-sector partners and with local families	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exchanges</li> <li>• Referrals</li> <li>• Network</li> <li>• Coordination</li> <li>• Co-location</li> </ul> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gathering and sharing of information, data, resource sharing</li> <li>• Communication</li> </ul>
ELEMENTS	 <b>Programs and Opportunities:</b> The array, accessibility, and quality of programs (e.g., home visiting), services (e.g., healthcare), and opportunities (e.g., jobs)	Not enough high-quality, affordable child care slots are available to meet the needs of local families	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Slots/openings</li> <li>• Quality</li> <li>• Cultural responsiveness</li> <li>• Curriculum</li> </ul> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hard to get to</li> <li>• “__ is at the wrong times”</li> <li>• In some places but not others</li> </ul>
	 <b>Human Resources:</b> People and their skills and knowledge	Cross-sector staff have skills in trauma-informed practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Available staff</li> <li>• Volunteers</li> <li>• Credentials</li> </ul> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Skills/knowledge</li> <li>• “People don’t know how to __”</li> </ul>
	 <b>Financial Resources:</b> Money and capital	Lack of funds to address the market failure within child care business models	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Money</li> <li>• Funding</li> <li>• Budget</li> </ul> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Financial capital</li> <li>• Cost</li> <li>• “Can’t afford __”</li> </ul>
	 <b>Natural and Built Environment:</b> Aspects of the natural (e.g., land, water) and built (e.g., buildings, roads, internet) environment	Broadband internet is unavailable within some rural areas of the region	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Building space</li> <li>• Physical infrastructure</li> <li>• Housing</li> </ul> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Not enough safe parks”</li> <li>• “We don’t have the technology to __”</li> </ul>
	 <b>Socio-Cultural Artifacts:</b> Information and images embedded throughout the system	Many early educational materials underrepresent diverse children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Documents</li> <li>• Images</li> <li>• Framework</li> </ul> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Research reports</li> <li>• Media/social media</li> <li>• Information</li> </ul>

Adapted from: [Watson & Collins \(2022\)](#). [Foster-Fishman & Watson \(2017\)](#). [Meadows \(1999\)](#). [Stroh \(2015\)](#).

## What have you already learned about ecosystem leverage points?

It's likely you and your partners have already learned some things about how different ecosystem leverage points are affecting your selected outcome(s) and associated disparities. You can compile and organize this information to jump start your assessment.

Consider looking into the following sources to find this information:

 Meeting Minutes	 Presentations	 Reports	 Prior assessments
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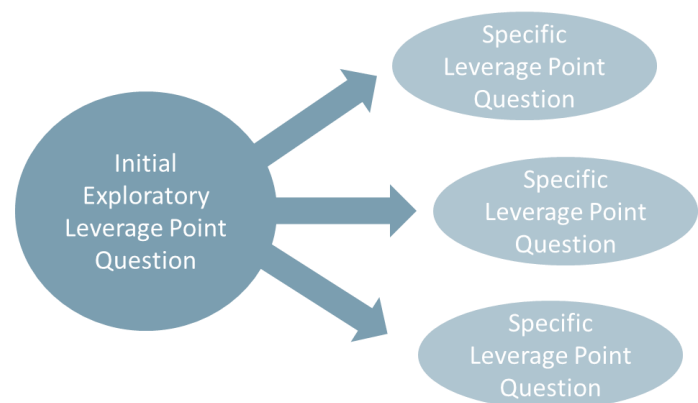
## Which leverage point questions do you still need to ask?

Given what you already know about the ecosystem leverage points currently helping and hindering your prioritized outcome(s) and reinforcing current disparities, which questions are most important to ask?

There are two types of questions about leverage points: **exploratory** and **specific**.

“Exploratory” questions ask about leverage points in general and are helpful to open up conversations.

“Specific” questions ask about particular examples of leverage points we know affect certain outcomes and are often useful as follow up questions.



### Tip for Selecting Questions

Ask exploratory and specific questions about *multiple* leverage point areas, as research shows leverage points often interact to affect outcomes and disparities.












## Example Exploratory Leverage Point Questions

The following are example exploratory leverage point questions. **These questions represent what you want to learn and can be reworded when you actually ask them in a conversation or survey.**

### Question Tip

Begin with this opening question, then follow up with the questions below:

**What is currently helping and hindering [insert your outcome/disparities] - and in what ways? What is missing that could improve this outcome?**

Leverage Point Conditions		Example Questions
PARADIGMS	 <b>Mindsets</b>	What shared beliefs, attitudes, values, or assumptions are helping and hindering [insert your outcome/disparities] - in what ways? What new mindsets are needed?
	 <b>Goals</b>	How are the goals driving the work within regional organizations, agencies, and initiatives helping and/or hindering [insert your outcome/disparities]? What new goals are needed?
STRUCTURES	 <b>Decision-Making</b>	How are decisions made about [insert your outcome/disparities] within organizations, agencies, and communities? Who is engaged in/excluded from these decision-making processes? How is this situation helping and/or hindering [insert your outcome/disparities]? What new decision-making processes are needed?
	 <b>Policies and Practices</b>	How are current policies, practices, procedures, regulations, and/or laws (and their implementation) within local organizations and regions helping and hindering [insert your outcome/disparities]? What new policies and practices are needed?
	 <b>Connections</b>	How are the current flows and exchanges of information, resources, referrals, and collaboration between people and organizations helping and hindering [insert your outcome/disparities]? What new flows and exchanges are needed?
ELEMENTS	 <b>Programs and Opportunities</b>	How is the current array, accessibility, character, and/or quality of programs (e.g., home visiting, early care and education), services (e.g., healthcare, public transit), and opportunities (e.g., jobs) helping and hindering [insert your outcome/disparities]? What is still needed?
	 <b>Human Resources</b>	How is the current availability of people (e.g., staff, family leaders, etc.) and their skills and knowledge helping and hindering [insert your outcome/disparities]? What additional types of people, skills, and knowledge are needed?
	 <b>Natural and Built Environment</b>	How is the current condition of the natural and built environment (e.g., land, water, housing, roads, technology/ internet, etc.) helping and hindering [insert your outcome/disparities]? What is still needed?
	 <b>Financial Resources</b>	How is the current allocation of funding and capital helping and hindering [insert your outcome/disparities]? What is still needed?
	 <b>Socio-Cultural Artifacts</b>	How is the information and images embedded in documents, media, social media, research reports, and public art helping and hindering [insert your outcome/disparities]? What new types of information and images are needed?

## Example Specific Leverage Point Questions

You can also ask questions about specific ecosystem leverage points that research suggests are important for improving your selected outcomes and associated disparities.





The following table shows the difference between exploratory and specific questions for two leverage points affecting the outcome of living wage employment.

Outcome: Parents/caregivers are employed in living wage jobs		
Leverage Points	Example Exploratory assessment Questions	Example Specific assessment Questions
<b>Policies and Practices</b>	<p>How are policies, practices, procedures, protocols, standards, regulations, and laws (e.g., within local organizations, cities, counties, etc.) helping and hindering opportunities for living wage employment in this region?</p> <p>How is this situation affecting current inequities in employment?</p>	<p>To what extent do employers' <i>hiring policies and procedures</i> disadvantage formerly incarcerated and other disadvantaged workers? Why are these policies and procedures still in place?</p> <p>To what extent do employers' HR policies and procedures support the <i>retention and promotion</i> of employees experiencing the greatest inequities in our region? What is helping and hindering this?</p>
<b>Connections</b>	<p>How are current flows and exchanges of information, resources, referrals, and collaboration between people and organizations helping and hindering opportunities for living wage employment in this region?</p> <p>How is this situation affecting current inequities in employment?</p>	<p>To what extent are parents and caregivers in this region organized and working together to address opportunities for living wage employment? What is helping and hindering this?</p> <p>To what extent are organizations working on [this focus area] exchanging information, data, training, and/or planning with other relevant organizations in the region to improve their efforts? What is helping and hindering this?</p>

## Who can answer your questions?

One of the best ways to deeply understand ecosystem leverage points contributing to your outcomes and associated disparities is through gathering rich qualitative “conversation” data from diverse perspectives.

Why? Because asking open ended questions (with strategic follow-up questions) with individuals representing diverse perspectives can illuminate a more comprehensive array of issues. It can also ensure you get enough detail to move to action. The following four perspective groups are particularly relevant to engage:

 <p><b>Families with lived experience</b> related to your prioritized outcome(s) and disparities.</p> <p>Consider both families who are currently connected and disconnected to the service delivery system.</p>	 <p><b>Direct service providers</b> from cross-sector organizations working to address families’ needs related to your prioritized outcome(s) and disparities.</p> <p>Examples of sectors include early care and education, K-12 education, health, housing, human services, economic development, transportation, etc.</p>	 <p><b>Leaders and Funders</b> within cross-sector organizations and entities working to address families’ needs related to your prioritized outcome(s) and disparities.</p> <p>Consider leaders across multiple organizational levels (e.g., directors and mid-level supervisors), local elected officials, and government agency leaders.</p>	 <p><b>Community Members</b> with a relevant perspective on what is helping and hindering your prioritized outcome(s) and disparities.</p> <p>Consider community members representing faith-based groups, businesses, neighborhood associations, peer networks, community leaders, etc.</p>
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Recognize that **some questions will be more relevant for certain perspective groups than others.**

For example, questions about high level policies are often more relevant for leaders, while questions about barriers to service access are often more relevant for families and service providers.

Families should always be asked questions about their experience of whether and how organizations and other collaborative groups are authentically engaging them in decision-making (e.g., about programs, policies, practices, priorities, staff hiring, etc.).

### Remember!








You should **always engage families with lived experience** to learn about the ecosystem leverage points affecting your outcomes.






Select the questions that are most relevant for their perspective.

## What methods could you use to engage these perspectives?

Engage families and partners in developing feasible *and* culturally responsive methods for engaging your identified perspectives to help answer your ecosystem questions. See the examples below for ideas. Consider how to reimburse families for their time and effort related to these different methods.

 <p><b>Natural Touch Point interviews, focus groups, or surveys</b></p> <p>Ask a few questions (directly or through a host) at naturally occurring meetings, service visits, or interactions through conversation or by giving out a survey.</p>	 <p><b>Peer Data Gatherers</b></p> <p>Prepare families and/or staff to ask questions in conversation or by giving out a survey with their peers and report back what they learn.</p>	 <p><b>Online Surveys and Social Media</b></p> <p>Send out questions through an online survey or social media; consider people's technology constraints with this method.</p>	 <p><b>Separate Interviews/Focus Groups</b></p> <p>Set up a separate one-on-one or group conversation (in person or virtual). Tip: this method is especially relevant for leaders/funders who expect this form of engagement.</p>	 <p><b>Photovoice<sup>6</sup></b></p> <p>Participants take pictures to answer questions and then come together in groups to describe the meaning of their images (both the images and group narrative are your data).</p>
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The below table shows how these example methods could be used with different perspective groups.

METHOD	Families	Service Providers	Leaders/Funders	Community Members
Natural touch point conversations or surveys 	Ask questions at service visits, during play groups, after worship services, in waiting rooms, etc.	Ask questions at staff meetings, supervisor meetings, professional networks, etc.	Ask questions at collaborative meetings, professional networks, etc.	Ask questions at local events, association meetings, etc.
Peer data gatherer conversations or surveys 	Equip individuals to ask questions with their peers using their networks.			
Online survey 	Send out link through relevant list-serves, group contact lists, social media, etc.			
Interviews/focus group conversations 	Use phone/video calls or in-person conversations at accessible locations like libraries, churches, parks, etc.	Use phone/video calls or in-person conversations at service providers' organization.	Use phone/video calls or in-person conversations at leaders' organization.	Use phone/video calls or in-person conversations at accessible locations like libraries, churches, parks, etc.
Photovoice 	Tailor the Photovoice process to unique cultures and needs of perspective groups.			

## Materials and processes to prepare for perspective group methods

Each of the example methods described on the prior pages relies on gathering data through either conversations, surveys (print or online), or the Photovoice process. You will need to develop some materials to get ready to launch the particular methods you have selected. The below table summarizes materials needed across the different types of methods. Make sure to consider how to make these materials culturally responsive, trauma informed, and accessible to all perspective groups.

Materials Needed to Launch	Preparation Processes
Conversations	
<p>Conversation guide for people asking assessment questions that includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Name:</b> a space for the person asking the questions to put their name and affiliation.</li> <li>• <b>Introduction:</b> talking points to describe the purpose of the conversation and how the information will be used to take action. Define your geographic boundary for these questions.</li> <li>• <b>Questions:</b> list out the questions leaving space underneath to write notes.</li> <li>• <b>Conclusion:</b> talking points to thank the person for their time and describe any next steps.</li> <li>• <b>Instructions for Sending in the Data:</b> clear instructions for how to send in their notes.</li> </ul> <p><a href="#">Example Family Conversation Template</a></p>	<p>Pilot materials with relevant groups and make needed revisions.</p> <p>Train any individuals who will be asking questions on your behalf on how to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use and fill out the conversation guide, including how to send in the notes.</li> <li>• Ask follow-up questions to get detailed, actionable responses from participants. <b>THIS IS CRITICAL</b> so someone who wasn't part of the conversation will know exactly what needs to change. Here are examples of follow-up questions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ What would that <b>look like</b>?</li> <li>○ Can you <b>tell me more</b> about ___?</li> <li>○ Could you <b>explain what you mean</b> by ___?</li> <li>○ Can you <b>give me an example</b>?</li> <li>○ <b>Who</b> does that involve? <b>When</b> does it happen? <b>Where?</b> <b>How?</b> <b>Why?</b></li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p><a href="#">Cheat Sheet: Getting Detailed Conversation Information</a></p>
Surveys	
<p>Introduction talking points (see above) for individuals handing out the survey.</p> <p>Printed or electronic survey that provides:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Introduction:</b> brief description of the purpose of the survey and how the information will be used to take action. Define your geographic boundary for these questions.</li> <li>• <b>Questions:</b> laid out in a simple format.</li> <li>• <b>Conclusion:</b> brief text thanking the person for their time and describing relevant next steps.</li> </ul> <p><a href="#">Example Family Survey Template</a></p>	<p>Pilot materials with relevant groups and make needed revisions.</p> <p>Provide the talking points to individuals handing out the survey and answer their questions.</p> <p>Work with organizations distributing printed surveys on your behalf to come up with processes for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• keeping surveys confidential (e.g., locked box)</li> <li>• how to get completed surveys back to you (e.g., send them in, have a staff member come and get them, etc.).</li> </ul>
Photovoice	
<p>There are many guides available online to help develop Photovoice materials and processes. Remember to vet materials with relevant groups, and/or engage them in co-designing the materials. Here are several example guides: <a href="#">Rutgers Photovoice Facilitation Guide</a>, <a href="#">Youth ReACT</a></p>	

## Wording of questions for different perspective groups

Developing your methods also involves tailoring the questions so they are relevant and accessible to different perspective groups. Below are examples of how questions can be tailored – sometimes significantly – for families, service providers, and organizational leaders.

### Wording Tip

Engage individuals from relevant perspective groups to help you develop wording for your questions, or provide feedback on drafted questions.



Learning Questions	Example wording for families	Example wording for service providers	Example wording for organizational leaders
OVERALL	What's getting in the way of [outcome/disparities] in this region/state? What's helping? What's missing that could help this situation?		
MINDSETS: What shared beliefs, attitudes, values, or assumptions are helping and hindering your selected outcome/disparities - and in what ways? What new mindsets are needed?	What are some beliefs people in this area have about [outcome/disparities]? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Which ones are helping us improve [outcome/disparities]?</li> <li>Which are getting in the way?</li> <li>What new beliefs and attitudes are needed?</li> </ul>		
GOALS: How are the goals and targeted outcomes (or lack thereof) within regional organizations, agencies, and initiatives helping and/or hindering your selected outcome/disparities? What new goals are needed?	In your experience, how much do local organizations and agencies focus on improving [outcome/disparities]? How much are they prioritizing this issue to work on?	To what extent do leaders in your organization or initiative talk about the need to improve [outcome/disparities] or include it in stated goals or outcomes for organization?	To what extent does your organization/initiative have stated goals or outcomes related to improving [outcome/disparities]? What new goals are needed?
DECISION-MAKING: How are decisions made about your selected outcome/disparities within organizations, agencies, and initiatives? Who is engaged in/excluded from these decision-making processes? How is this situation helping and/or hindering the outcome/disparities?	Have any organizations working on [outcome/disparities] in this region ever asked for your input about things like what to include in their programs, how to improve their policies, or what staff to hire? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What was that experience like?</li> <li>Did you feel acknowledged and valued in these discussions?</li> </ul>	To what extent are you engaged in your organization's decision-making about your programs and policies, and priorities? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How is this affecting our ability to improve [outcome/disparities]?</li> </ul>	To what extent does your organization engage families and staff in decision-making about your programs and policies, and priorities? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Why or why not?</li> <li>How is this affecting our ability to improve [outcome/disparities]?</li> </ul>
POLICIES AND PRACTICES: How are current policies, practices, procedures, protocols, standards, regulations, and laws (e.g., within local organizations, cities, counties, etc.) helping	What are some of the rules, policies, and processes you've encountered related to [outcome/disparities]? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Which ones work well?</li> <li>Which ones don't?</li> </ul>	What rules, policies, and/or processes within local organizations – including your own – do you see making it difficult for families to get their needs	What rules, policies, and/or processes within local organizations and agencies – including your own – do you see making it difficult for families to get their



Learning Questions	Example wording for families	Example wording for service providers	Example wording for organizational leaders
and hindering your selected outcome/disparities? What new policies and practices are needed?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How do these rules, policies, and processes need to change to work better for you and other families?</li> </ul>	<p>met related to [outcome/disparities]?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How could these be improved to better meet families' needs and circumstances?</li> </ul>	<p>needs met related to [outcome/disparities]?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How could these be improved to better meet families' needs and circumstances?</li> </ul>
<p>CONNECTIONS: How are current flows and exchanges of information, resources, and referrals between people and organizations helping and hindering the outcome/disparities in the region?</p>	<p>Do organizations in this community ever refer you to other programs, services, or supports you need related to [outcome/disparities]?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How have these referrals gone – what worked or didn't work?</li> <li>Were you referred to these supports early on when you first could have benefited from them, or after you had already needed them for a while?</li> <li>What needs to be different to make referrals work better in this community?</li> </ul> <p>How easy is it to find information about community programs and resources related to [outcome/disparities]?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What are better ways to get information to parents and caregivers?</li> </ul>	<p>To what extent does your organization/agency refer families to other outside programs and supports related to [outcome/disparities]? OR...how often are families referred to you?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What is helping and hindering this?</li> <li>How is this situation affecting our ability to improve [outcome/disparities]?</li> </ul> <p>To what extent does your organization/agency share relevant information and data with other organizations working on [outcome/disparities]?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What is helping and hindering this?</li> <li>How is this situation affecting our ability to improve [outcome/disparities]?</li> </ul>	<p>To what extent are local organizations and agencies working together to address [outcome/disparities]? This could include things like exchanging information, sharing resources, or making referrals.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Why do you think this is or isn't happening?</li> </ul>
<p>PROGRAMS AND OPPORTUNITIES: How is the current array, accessibility, character, and/or quality of programs (e.g., home visiting, early care and education), services (e.g., healthcare, public transit), and opportunities (e.g., jobs) helping and hindering [insert your outcome/disparities]? What is still needed?</p>	<p>What's it like trying to get programs, services, and supports related to [outcome/disparities]?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What would make it easier to get access to what you need?</li> </ul> <p>What have been your experiences with getting transportation to programs and supports related to [outcome/disparities]?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What would make this easier?</li> </ul>	<p>How easy is it for families in this community to get the programs and services they need when they need them related to [outcome/disparities]?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What's getting in the way?</li> <li>How could this situation be improved?</li> </ul>	<p>What barriers are local families encountering to getting the programs and services they need when they need them related to [outcome/disparities]?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How could this situation be improved?</li> </ul>

Learning Questions	Example wording for families	Example wording for service providers	Example wording for organizational leaders
HUMAN RESOURCES: How is the availability of people and their skills and knowledge helping and hindering the outcome/disparities?	<p>Think about the staff in the organizations/agencies you and your family have engaged with in the last 12 months related to [outcome/disparities].</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How comfortable do you feel with these staff – why? What could be improved?</li> <li>How well do these staff listen to you? What could be improved?</li> <li>How well are these staff able to help you meet your unique needs? What could be improved?</li> </ul>	<p>Are there any areas you would like more professional development around to build your skills so you can more effectively help meet people’s needs around [outcome/disparities]?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>If yes, what are these skills areas?</li> </ul>	<p>To what extent are there enough staff in place to meet regional needs related to [outcome/disparities]?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To what extent do these staff reflect and represent families with lived experience? What’s helping and hindering this?</li> <li>To what extent do staff in the region have the skills they need to improve [outcome/disparities]? What skills are still needed? What’s helping and hindering this?</li> </ul>
NATURAL AND BUILT ENVIRONMENT: How is the current condition of the natural and built environment (e.g., land, water, housing, roads, technology/ internet, etc.) helping and hindering [insert your outcome/disparities]? What is still needed?	<p>How safe is the neighborhood you live in? Does this ever get in the way of [outcome/disparities]?</p> <p>What are the parks like in your neighborhood? How about the air and water quality? Does this ever get in the way of [outcome/disparities]?</p> <p>What are the roads like in your community? Internet connections? Housing quality? Does this ever get in the way of [outcome/disparities]?</p>	<p>How is the local environment – including the quality and accessibility of parks and clean water and air - affecting [outcome/disparities]?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How could this situation be improved?</li> </ul> <p>How is the quality and accessibility of roads, buildings, and technology affecting [outcome/disparities]?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How could this situation be improved?</li> </ul>	
FINANCIAL RESOURCES: How is the current allocation of funding and capital helping and hindering [insert your outcome/disparities]? What is still needed?	<p>Is funding fairly distributed to projects and organizations focused on [outcome/ disparities in your community – or are there some that get more funding than others?</p>	<p>Do most organizations focused on [outcome/ disparities in your region have access to similar amounts of funding – or are there some that get more funding than others?</p>	<p>How is the current allocation of funding and capital to organizations in this region helping and hindering [outcome/ disparities]?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Where are there inequities in the allocation of funding?</li> <li>What is driving this situation?</li> </ul>



Learning Questions	Example wording for families	Example wording for service providers	Example wording for organizational leaders
<p><b>SOCIO-CULTURAL ARTIFACTS:</b> How is the information and images embedded in documents, media, social media, research reports, and public art helping and hindering <i>[insert your outcome/disparities]</i>? What new types of information and images are needed?</p>	<p>How well do the books and materials you and other caregivers use to teach your children represent your family and community?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How is this affecting <i>[outcome/disparities]</i>?</li> </ul> <p>How does local television, newspapers, advertising, and social media talk about <i>[outcome/disparities]</i>?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How is this affecting our community's ability to improve <i>[outcome/disparities]</i>?</li> </ul>	<p>How well do the materials you use to teach children represent the diverse families you engage?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How is this affecting <i>[outcome/disparities]</i>?</li> <li>How are these materials selected?</li> </ul> <p>How does local television, newspapers, advertising, and social media talk about <i>[outcome/disparities]</i>?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How is this affecting our community's ability to improve <i>[outcome/disparities]</i>?</li> </ul>	<p>How do research and evaluation reports frame <i>[outcome/disparities]</i>?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How is this affecting our ability to improve <i>[outcome/disparities]</i>?</li> </ul> <p>How does local television, newspapers, advertising, and social media talk about <i>[outcome/disparities]</i>?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How is this affecting our community's ability to improve <i>[outcome/disparities]</i>?</li> </ul>



### Translation Tip

If you need to translate assessment questions for any perspective group, consider contracting with local partner organizations (at a respectable compensation rate) to help with translating the materials.

Going through local partner organizations can help ensure that the final translated versions are not only accurate but also responsive to the local regional context.





## How will you gather information from relevant data sources?

In addition to talking with diverse perspectives, you may also be able to answer your questions through existing or potential data sources.

**Existing data sources** have already been collected and compiled, they just need to be accessed (and potentially analyzed). External partners can often use their connections to access existing databases.

**Potential data sources** refer to data that *could be* gathered and/or compiled through simple modifications to current data gathering processes. These modifications could be made to internal data systems (e.g., add a function into an organization's existing data system to extract information from staff members' monthly documentation records about the number and type of referrals they are making to external organizations) or to current or planned data collection processes (e.g., add a few questions to an upcoming community health needs assessment survey or community town hall forum).

The following are several common types of existing and potential data sources you could access to help answer your questions.

 <p><b>Public Databases</b> (e.g., U.S. Census, Quality Rating Systems, County Health Rankings, etc.)</p>	 <p><b>Local Agency &amp; Organization Databases</b> (e.g., Health and Human Services, Health Department, etc.)</p>	 <p><b>Evaluation Reports</b> (e.g., evaluations of programs or initiatives, foundation reports, etc.)</p>	 <p><b>Conversation Records</b> (e.g., from prior collaborative meetings, staff meetings, community town halls, etc.)</p>
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### Common Barrier: Partners are reluctant to share data

Sometimes partners hesitate to share their data because of confidentiality laws or policies, or due to fear of what others will think or how the data could be weaponized against them.

Here are a few ideas for how to address this tension:

- If they don't already exist, develop group norms or mutual agreements for how partners will work together to share and use data.
- If needed, develop more formal Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) to clarify agreements and processes for sharing and using data.
- Meet with concerned partners behind the scenes to fully understand their concerns and talk about ways to address them.

# Overall method considerations

## Schedule when to roll out your methods

Work with partners to schedule how to roll out your methods. Design this schedule to fit with people’s availability, mesh with any other methods happening in the region, and leverage events and opportunities to naturally gather data.

Your methods can also inform each other. For example, you can take what you are learning from conversations and use it to guide what questions to ask in future surveys.



### Scheduling Tip

Ask a few questions at a time *over time* to keep this feasible.

EXAMPLE: ask 3 questions during natural touchpoints for one month, and 3 more questions during natural touchpoints the next month.

## Gather short cycle feedback on your methods

No matter how well you plan out and prepare for your methods, unanticipated implementation issues and/or opportunities can always emerge. For example, you may discover some of the people asking questions on your behalf aren’t getting detailed enough responses from participants. This implementation issue would require an immediate response (i.e., providing additional training on how to ask follow-up questions) to avoid getting stuck with a lot of unusable data.

It is *always* a good idea to “pilot” your methods with a small group of participants before launching them full scale so you can quickly identify any issues and adapt the methods or questions. After launching, continue gathering feedback (e.g., monthly or bi-weekly) to identify emerging issues.

Example feedback to gather about your methods	What to do if issues emerge
<p><b>DETAIL:</b> Are participants providing detailed enough responses in conversation methods? Remember, you want enough detail so someone who wasn’t part of the conversation would know exactly what needs to change or be addressed.</p> <p>Example of a response WITHOUT enough detail: <i>My family needs more support.</i></p> <p>Example of a response WITH enough detail: <i>My family needs more support with finding and navigating available home visiting options in my area.</i></p>	<p>Pinpoint which individuals asking the assessment questions are not getting enough detailed responses.</p> <p>Meet with these individuals, kindly bring up the issues you are seeing, and provide some additional training to help them ask the right follow up questions to get the detail you need.</p> <p>Draw on the <a href="#">Cheat Sheet: Getting Detailed Conversation Information</a> handout as you meet with these individuals.</p>
<p><b>UNDERSTANDING:</b> Are participants giving responses that show they are confused about what the questions are asking?</p>	<p>Pinpoint which questions are not making sense for which perspective groups. Work with some representatives of these perspective groups to revise the questions.</p>
<p><b>FORGETTING:</b> Are the people who agreed to ask questions on your behalf remembering to actually ask the questions?</p>	<p>Pinpoint who is experiencing this issue and work with them and their organization to insert reminders into protocols and staff meetings.</p>

## Type up conversation notes quickly

Encourage people to write/type up their conversation notes shortly after holding a conversation (e.g., within 24 hours).

This helps with filling in more details from the conversation while their memory is still fresh, and if necessary give them time to check back with the individuals they spoke with to clarify their comments.



### Notes Tip

If possible and appropriate, encourage people to type up their conversation notes directly into their conversation protocol – ideally while they are having the conversation - as this prevents interpretation errors (from scratchy handwriting) and saves you time with compiling everyone’s notes.

## Modify questions over time

As you begin to make sense of your data (this will be the focus of our next session), reflect on whether any of your questions should change given what you are learning. This could include no longer asking some questions or adding new questions.

Consider the following scenarios:

Hearing the same answers over and over again	If you are getting the same answers over and over from multiple people in response to one of your questions, it may not make sense to continue asking it. This is referred to as “reaching saturation” and often signals you can stop asking the question (as you will most likely just continue to get the same responses)
New questions emerge from data	As you read through your data, sometimes new questions will emerge. These could relate to getting more detail about a certain insight or theme, or understanding why something is happening. You can add these questions into your assessment as you go.

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