Toolkit of Activities

A Variety of Ways to Engage Meeting Participants and Hear Their Voices

Summary of key activities used in the 2008-2010 New England Breakthrough Series Collaborative (BSC) on Safety and Risk Assessments and the 2011 New England Convening on Safety Assessments and Planning with Families

Casey Family Programs & The New England Association of Child Welfare Commissioners and Directors

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ACTIVITY TOOLKIT - INTRODUCTION

This toolkit provides overviews and instructions for several experientially-based activities that were used over the course of the New England Breakthrough Series Collaborative on Safety and Risk Assessments (2008-2010) as well as the 2011 New England Convening on Safety Assessments and Planning with Families. These descriptions are intended to support participants in bringing these activities 'back home' to do with others in their offices, regions, and states. The Planning Teams for these projects encourages states to adapt and use any of these activities and/or examples to best meet participants' individual needs.

List of Activities Included

ACTIVITY TOOLKIT

Giving Something Up (a.k.a. "The Index Card Activity")

This activity can be used as an ice-breaker to help people understand what it feels like to have a limited way to define yourself, as well as how it might feel to have others define you. It is particularly compelling as a way to convey the powerlessness that families and youth may feel when becoming involved with child welfare systems.

Session Goals

- Understand how limited categories can feel inadequate to defining oneself.
- Recognize the continued importance of treating families and youth as partners.

Session Set-Up

- Participants sitting in pairs. (They may be sitting in any configuration, e.g., large round tables, but each person will need exactly one partner for this activity.)

- Five 4x6 index cards per participant.

- Predetermined categories for identification. Examples are provided in the Session Flow section below.

Session Flow

- Each participant is instructed to take five blank index cards. Each category below is read one at a time, allowing participants to write their responses on one index card each.
  - What is your role / title / identity in this work?
  - Where do you consider yourself 'from?' (e.g., if someone at this meeting were to ask you)
  - How do you identify your race, ethnicity, and/or culture?
  - What do you consider your most important family role (mother, father, sister, brother, grandparent, etc.)?
  - What is your most meaningful possession?

- Participants will then go into their pairs. Each pair will be instructed to take one of their partner's cards away, with no further instructions about how this should happen. After they do this they should discuss with one another the significance of losing that specific card – how it feels to them to no longer have it as part of their identity.

- Every 2-3 minutes, the facilitator will instruct the participants to take another one of their partners' cards. (Both partners are taking cards so they will continue to have the same number of cards throughout.) Each time they will follow the card removal with a brief discussion about that aspect of their identity. They will continue doing this at 2-3 minute intervals until everyone has only one card left.

- When everyone only has one card left, the group will have a large group discussion about what it feels like to have only one piece of yourself. The group will also discuss:

    - Different ways that pairs approached the 'taking of the cards' – why? When no instructions were given, what made some people just take one 'blindly' while others talked about and agreed which ones should be taken in which order?

    - How can this exercise be thought of as a metaphor for working with families and youth in some sort of authentic partnership?

    - How can this exercise be thought of as a metaphor for what skills are needed to work with families and youth as partners? How do these skills demonstrate or reflect values?

    - What about practice (or tools) forces people to feel as if they're giving up their cards? How can practice be done in ways that allow people to hold onto their cards?

ACTIVITY TOOLKIT

World Café

This is a discussion-based activity in which participants form groups of four to talk about a series of progressively challenging questions. The questions are determined ahead of time and typically end with solution-focused questions that result in concrete strategies. The underlying theory behind the World Café activity is that participants already have the answers; they simply need to be asked the 'right' questions in the 'right' setting to find them.

Session Goals

- Encourage meaningful conversations about important topics
- Hear and share multiple perspectives
- Brainstorm ideas to realize visions
- Generate collective ideas that help move from vision to action

Session Set-Up

- Participants should be seated in groups of 4-5 (absolutely no more than 6 people per group). Ideally, seating should be informal, comfortable, either around small tables or with chairs pulled away from larger tables.

- If around small tables, colorful scrap paper, post-it notes, or easel paper can be placed on the tables along with writing supplies (markers, colored pens, crayons) to inspire doodling and creativity throughout the conversations.

- This activity requires at least one hour, but can take up to 1.5 hours depending on the topics/questions being addressed.

- The three questions for this activity should be developed in advance and should move from a visionary / ideal world question to a challenge/barrier question, ending with a solution-focused question. For example:

    - In an ideal world, what would your vision be for [topic]? What would it look like to you? How would you know it when you saw it?

    - Why doesn't it look this way today? What's stopping this vision from being today's reality?

- How could you address these challenges or barriers to make this your reality? What could you start doing right away to make it so?

Session Flow

- Participants will be seated in small groups and may be given the attached 'World Café Etiquette' sheet. These rules may be briefly reviewed with participants to help orient them to the activity.

- The group will be given 10-20 minutes (depending on the overall length of the session) to discuss the first question with their table mates. They should be encouraged to talk openly as well as to use the writing / drawing supplies to help express themselves.

- At the conclusion of the first question, there can either be a large group debrief about vision or the group may want to move directly into the second question. If the latter, the tables should be instructed for one person to remain at the table (the 'table host') and all other participants should find a new place to sit with people they haven't yet spoken with.

    - NOTE: The table hosts do not have to do any active facilitation. They will be asked to greet the newcomers to their tables and provide a brief overview about what their groups discussed in the prior round. They will remain at the same table for all three rounds while all other participants will move to different tables.

- The groups, in their new seating arrangements, will have the same instructions as they address the second question. This will also be a 10-20 minute discussion, depending on the overall time allotted for the session.

- A final switch will happen in which participants (except the Table Hosts) will sit with new people again to discuss the final question.

- At the conclusion of the final question, participants will return to their initial seats for a large group debrief on the conversations, focusing on solutions that were identified to make the vision a reality.

- Any drawings, notes, doodlings, etc. can be displayed on the walls for the remainder of the meeting.

Example

World Café

The World Café is built on the assumption that people already have within them the wisdom and creativity to confront even the most difficult challenges.

Objectives

- Meaningful conversation about your personal vision of leadership
- Hear and share multiple perspectives
- Brainstorm ideas to realize your vision
- Generate collective ideas that help move to action

How It Works

- Join in a four-person conversation at your tables
- When prompted, move to a new table & respond to a new question for deepened discussion and learning (will happen twice)
- Table hosts summarize the previous discussion for the newcomers and ask the next question
- After two moves, return to your table for large group discussion

Café Etiquette

- Focus on what matters
- Contribute your thinking
- Speak your mind and heart
- Listen to understand
- Assume best intentions
- Link and connect ideas
- Listen together for insights and deeper questions
- HAVE FUN

ROUND 1 QUESTION:

- Vision / Ideal World

ROUND 2 QUESTION:

- Challenges / Barriers

ROUND 3 QUESTION:

- Solutions

ACTIVITY TOOLKIT

Paired Interviews

This activity allows participants to have brief, structured, one-on-one conversations about specific questions. It can be used for a variety of topics but is best with large groups that would benefit from smaller, more intimate discussions. It relies on the development of several key questions that participants will pose to one another in order to facilitate their mutual interviews.

Session Goals

- Allow for personal reflection.
- Have personal one-on-one conversations with other participants.
- Identify themes across various participants.

Session Set-Up

- Development of 6-12 unique questions, depending on size of group. (Each question should be asked of roughly 8-14 participants.)
- Equal copies of each question printed on a <u>different colored sheet of paper</u>. The paper will include a number at the top; the opening language; the actual question; a few question prompts; and plenty of blank space for interviewers to take notes as they go. (An example is provided at the end of this document.) There should be enough copies to divide the large group into equal numbers. For instance, if there are 100 participants and 10 questions, there should be 10 copies of each question.
- One blown up version of each question (no prompts – just the headline question) on newsprint to hang around the room for the debrief session.
- Easels or newsprint for each question for debrief session.
- Markers for each debrief group.
- This activity requires at least an hour, although a longer session is preferred to allow for a more robust debrief period.

Session Flow

- The facilitator spends roughly 5-15 minutes setting the stage for the topic. This might be done through a brief panel discussion, sharing of personal stories, reflections, case examples, or vignettes, or watching a video. Before the one-on-one interviews begin, it is extremely important for participants to feel comfortable with the personal reflection and sharing this activity will require.

- Facilitator gives instructions about the goals and flow of the activity.
    - Each participant gets one (and only one) of the questions, each on a separate color coded sheet.
    - The participants are then instructed to find someone they don't know (or at least don't know well) <u>with a different colored sheet</u> to 'interview.' The interview pairs will have 8-10 minutes to both ask their question and respond to their partner's question. (Participants are encouraged to take notes on their partners' responses directly on their interview sheet.)
    - At roughly 4-5 minutes, the facilitator should remind pairs to trade interviewer-interviewee roles.
    - After 8-10 minutes, participants are instructed to find another person with yet another color sheet. (This person should have neither the same color sheet as the interviewer, nor the same color sheet of the round 1 interviewee.)
    - They will follow the same instructions as above with regards to interviewing and being interviewed.
    - After 8-10 minutes, everyone will switch one final time so that each person will have been interviewed with three different questions as well as will have asked three different people their interview question.
- Participants are then instructed to go to the designated space in the room with other participants who had the same question they did. (There should be the pre-printed newsprint sheets around the room.) They will discuss with one another the various responses they heard to their single question. They will focus on identifying: a) themes that emerged across participants; b) answers that were surprising, unusual, or unexpected; and c) their own reflections to this question, especially as they listened to others' responses. This debrief should be captured on the newsprint. (These groups are self-facilitated.)
- The large group then reconvenes and the individual groups are asked to share highlights, although not specific debriefs, from each question. Groups will be invited to share their own observations and reflections and individuals will also be able to do the same.

EXAMPLE

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Below is your 'headline' interview question. Begin with the main question and let your interviewee take it where they want it to go. If they seem stuck, confused, ask for clarification, or finish responding before the time is up, feel free to ask some of the prompts below the headline question (or ask questions of your own!) to keep learning more.

1. When have you been in a situation (either in the BSC, in your work, or in your life) when you have felt uncomfortable talking about race, ethnicity, or culture?

Prompts:

- What about the situation made you feel uncomfortable?
- What would you have wanted to do or say differently to make it more comfortable?
- What did you learn from this experience?

INTERVIEW AND REFLECTION NOTES:

ACTIVITY TOOLKIT

Scaling Activity

This activity is designed to help participants develop visual pictures of their beliefs about their work. It can be done on a variety of issues, but can provide a powerful (yet fairly anonymous) visual image of the different perspectives that people have about a specific issue or topic.

Session Goals

- Create shared understanding of specific topic or issue.
- Recognize the strong similarities between different groups, despite perceived.
- Recognize the differences that may exist between different groups, depending on perspectives and unique experiences.

Session Set-Up

- Posters should be developed that have a set of statements (the same for each group) with a likert scale following each one. (An example is provided at the conclusion of this document.)
- Participants should be instructed to sit by pre-defined "affinity" group, depending on the topic.
- The affinity group name should be apparent on each of the posters for debrief and further discussions.
- Each participant should have one colorful sticker for each statement (for voting).
- Roughly 30 minutes is needed for this activity: 5-10 minutes for personal voting and reflection; 10 minutes for small group discussion; 10 minutes for large group discussion. More time may be required for large group discussion depending on the size of the overall group as well as the number of affinity groups.

Session Flow

- Participants begin by introducing themselves to one another, depending on the groups. (Each group will be self-facilitated so that there are no 'outsiders.' This is important to ensure that participants can vote honestly.) After their own brief introductions, the overall room facilitator asks all participants to place their stickers on the likert scale line that best indicates where they believe they are on the continuum. This should be done individually and without any large group or small group conversations.

- Following the voting, participants are instructed to self-facilitate conversations on each of the scaling questions to discuss what they think the overall affinity team 'vote' reflects. All participants can be reminded that their vote can be anonymous.
- The large group will be reconvened, each bringing their likert scales with the votes reflected. Questions should be hung together so that similarities and differences between the various affinity groups are visually apparent. The large group discussion should focus on observations and reflections, rather than looking for any single group to 'explain' or 'defend' their beliefs. *[NOTE: This exercise is not intended to make any group feel defensive, nor is it to place any other group in judgment. Instead it is intended to highlight the need for various perspectives when review or discussing any topic.]*

Example

VALUES AND PRINCIPLES IN ACTION

For each statement below, place your sticker along the line based on how well you feel your agency reflects this values in its work with families at various decision-points.

We actively engage mothers, fathers, children, youth and their kin as true partners during….

… intakes, screenings, and investigations.

We are rarely, if ever, able to include families in doing this.

We always do this in partnership with families.

…initial assessments.

We are rarely, if ever, able to include families in doing this.

We always do this in partnership with families.

…placement decisions (including decisions around stability).

We are rarely, if ever, able to include families in doing this.

We always do this in partnership with families.

ACTIVITY TOOLKIT

Lightning Rounds

This activity is intended to help participants move quickly from naming challenges and concerns to brainstorming a large number of possible solutions. It is typically done in groups of ten or less and should be focused on a specific topic or concern. It requires space for flip-charts for all groups and can become fairly loud as the brainstorming begins.

Session Goals

- Identify challenges and barriers to a specific topic or issue.
- Individually brainstorm as many solutions as possible.
- Organize and prioritize solutions into concrete strategies.

Session Set-Up

- Participants should be seated in groups of 4-5 (absolutely no more than 6 people per group). Ideally, seating should be informal and comfortable, preferably around small tables.
- Each group should have a flip chart and easel available. If a flip chart on an easel is not available, a piece of newsprint can be taped to a nearby wall. (The group will be using the newsprint throughout the activity.)
- The newsprint should be divided into two columns. The left column should be titled "Challenges / Barriers" and the right column should be titled "Solutions / Opportunities."
- There should be a large supply of small square post-it notes on the table (enough for each participant to have at least ten).
- This activity requires at least 30 minutes, but an hour is preferable to allow for large group debrief.

Session Flow

- Participants are given instruction to have an open discussion at their tables for roughly 10-15 minutes. This discussion should focus on all of the concerns, fears, and challenges they believe are associated with the specified topic. People should be encouraged to get as concrete and descriptive as possible. These challenges should be scribed by a group member in the left-hand column of the newsprint.

- Participants are then introduced to the notion of "Lightning Rounds." In this next portion of the session, they will use the post-it notes to brainstorm individually (quiet writing, no table talk) AS MANY opportunities to address the identified challenges and maximize the hopes from the previous session as possible. This will last for 5-10 minutes, depending on the topic and group. But here's the twist….
    - As a participant writes on a post-it, he/she must stand up, slap the post-it on the right-hand column of the newsprint, and read it out loud. This is the only talking that is allowed (no discussion, clarification, questions, etc.) – only an announcement of the idea.
    - During this time, everyone else is continuing to write, and the participant should sit back down and brainstorm another idea.
    - This portion of the session should be energizing, chaotic, loud, and extremely fast-paced. It usually feels like popcorn – starting slowly, getting very loud as multiple people are popping up simultaneously at each table, and then getting quieter again, as the ideas dwindle.
- Each group will then look at all of the opportunities it identified and try to organize them into themes / similar ideas. This is where they should be encouraged to discuss and clarify – although not discourage – what they brainstormed. As they move ideas into themes, they should then group the opportunities/ strategies into the following three "buckets" to share with the large group:
    - Easy to Do: *"We could probably start doing this right away without too much trouble."*
    - Middle of the Road: *"We need to do some more thinking, planning, or get some approval for this, but this seems pretty reasonable with a bit more work."*
    - Hard but Critical: *"We're not sure what it would take to make this happen – or if it's even possible -- but we believe it is critical, even though it feels a bit pie-in-the-sky."*
- Depending on how much time has been dedicated to this session, it is ideal to conclude with a large group discussion. Challenges may be shared first, but the emphasis should be on the sharing of opportunities based on the categories above so that all the 'easy to dos' come out first, followed by the 'middle of the roads,' and ending with the 'hard but criticals.'

ACTIVITY TOOLKIT

Solution-Focused Planning Activity

This activity focuses on the development of potential solutions for participant-identified challenges. It allows each participant to reflect on their most significant challenges and/or barriers; share them anonymously (if they choose) with the group; and have the group brainstorm solutions for them.

Session Goals

- Share organizational challenges and questions.
- Identify potential solutions for other participants' challenges and questions.

Session Set-Up

- Groups should be either self-selected or pre-assigned to ensure that roughly 6-10 people are in each group. Each group should have a focused topic for this activity.
- This activity requires at least 45 minutes, but can take up to 1.5 hours depending on the topics being addressed. It is essential to have a designated facilitator and helpful to have an assigned note-taker (on flipcharts and/or on a computer).
- Each group needs a stack of 4 x 6 index cards for participants to use. A flipchart is also important to take notes for the group throughout the discussion.

Session Flow

- Facilitator should begin by going around and allowing participants to do brief introductions, e.g., name, role, and why they are most interested in the specific topic being discussed.
- Introduction to Activity: This is a Solution-Focused Planning Activity, which means that while the group will focus on challenges, it will try to make sure that it collectively develops potential solutions – or at least opportunities for each identified challenge. If any of the groups are particularly large (more than ~12 people) they might want to divide up so that they are doing the activity with 6-10 people per table, but this will be at the discretion of the facilitator.
- Each participant will be asked to write their response to the question below on a single index card (no names). As they finish writing they will place their index card face down

in the middle of the table. They may write more than one challenge, but each challenge should be specific, clear, and on a separate card.

- When you think about this topic, what do you think is the biggest challenge or barrier you currently face?

  NOTE ABOUT BARRIERS/CHALLENGES: Participants should be discouraged from noting "time" or "resources/money/funding" as these are not challenges that the group can typically address.

- One participant will volunteer to go first. This person will choose a card from the stack in the middle; read it aloud; and then try to suggest a solution and/or opportunity. Others in the group will be invited to provide other solutions and/or opportunities, as well as to share similar barriers / challenges in their own work.
  - In thinking about solutions, participants should be encouraged to think broadly and creatively, without limitations.
  - Participants should also be discouraged from responding in "yes, but" format (as in "yes, but that wouldn't work for me because). A goal of this activity is to look for similarities and opportunities, rather than focus on differences or limiting factors.
- Once the index card has received thorough discussion and people feel a reasonable / possible solution was proposed (no matter how small) the next participant will pick a card from the middle and the same process will be followed.
- The facilitator may flip chart the barriers/challenges and possible solutions throughout the discussion.
- If someone reads a card that participants agree has already been addressed in the conversation, he/she may choose another card.
- Any cards that participants collectively feel were not addressed by the group can be brought back to the large group session at the conclusion of the activity for reflection (if time permits).
- An overall take away is that individuals often are struck with similar challenges and collectively they can often come up with some practical solutions and opportunities. Moreover, it is often easier to solve someone else's problems than our own.