A Holistic Approach to Facilitated Dialogue

The Application of Dialogue Techniques To Advance a Family Strengthening Agenda

A Report for the Annie E. Casey Foundation

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A Holistic Approach to Facilitated Dialogue
The Application of Dialogue Techniques to Advance a Family Strengthening Agenda

I. The Application of Dialogue Techniques to Advance a Family Strengthening Agenda

The process of dialogue – from the Greek, “to explore meaning” – is anything but a normal conversation. Peter Senge defines dialogue as a “sustained collective inquiry into everyday experience and what we take for granted.” He elaborates that the goal of dialogue is to open new ground by establishing “a setting where people can become more aware of the context around their experience, and the process of thought and feeling that created that experience.” True dialogue employs methodologies to draw out the meaning that exists within and between its participants.

In the Family Strengthening Dialogue Project, the Emerging Partnerships Group (EPG) identifies 6 dimensions of dialogue that can help groups open new ground in making sense of what can be done to improve conditions for children and families in neighborhoods.
In addition to providing some insight into the process and purpose of dialogue, we offer tools and guidance for facilitators who want to apply this dialogue approach to family strengthening conversations. In identifying skills for facilitators, we focus specifically on describing a facilitation approach that we call *Map-less Guiding*.

This project was prompted by questions the Casey Foundation’s TARC asked the Emerging Partnerships Group to address about what it would take to guide and support family strengthening conversations in Making Connections sites. In addressing these questions, we offer a framework to help TA providers and local leaders make the most of what dialogue can contribute. The framework addresses ways to effectively integrate dialogue into a continuum of activities. Within this continuum we highlight considerations for widening and deepening the impact of dialogues.

The work described here is informed by our experience working with groups, as well as the literature on dialogue. This work also draws lessons from actual experiences in the Louisville, Kentucky Making Connections site. In Louisville, a series of strategically inter-woven dialogues have contributed to participants (organizations and residents) in five neighborhoods having reached, not the most obvious, but the most evolved insights about what family strengthening requires of them and their community.

Although the use of dialogue to arrive at shared understanding has been with us since the days of the ancient Greeks, the formal use of dialogue as a catalyst for community and organizational change has undergone a renaissance of late. The numerous publications (Yankelovich, Senge, the Dialogue Project at MIT, Isaacs, et al) and the proliferation of dialogue approaches in the field of organizational development is evidence of an emerging trend that deserves careful scrutiny by anyone exploring tools for social change. In addition to various dialogically oriented approaches currently in use in Making Connections (such as Family Circles), there has been a growing interest within The Casey Foundation itself in the adoption of formal dialogue techniques.

Since this project began, more than twenty Casey Fellows have received some degree of Foundation-sponsored training in the Senge and Isaacs approaches to Dialogue. The Consensus Organizing Institute, which has worked with Making Connections sites regarding community organizing issues, incorporates Yankelovich’s dialogue model into its training in consensus organizing.

**Facilitated Dialogue as a Major Component of a Diverse Toolkit**

Facilitated dialogue is best used as a *complementary* tool that can both inform and reinforce other Making Connection site efforts. These efforts include action planning, data collection and dissemination, building partnerships, and institutional development.

The effective use of facilitated dialogue to engage people in family strengthening issues within and between constituencies can potentially produce numerous benefits.
Facilitated Family Strengthening Dialogues can help people in Making Connections neighborhoods to:

1) Build shared understanding of the meaning of family strengthening.

2) Illuminate the different perspectives on family support that inevitably lie beneath the surface of customary discussions about family strengthening.

3) Evolve new thinking about family strengthening

4) Support effective neighborhood/community level action planning and design

5) Widen the circle of people and organizations that embrace family strengthening principles

The Six Dimensions of Dialogue

Successful dialogue demands a well thought-out approach. Drawing from the relevant literature and years of experience in the field, the Emerging Partnerships Group has identified what we consider to be the 6 key dimensions of dialogue.

1. Equality and the absence of coercive influence
2. Listening with empathy
3. Bringing assumptions into the open
4. Developing new insights into how ideas relate
5. Helping people deal with paradoxes and tensions between worldviews
6. Evolving a greater sense of the whole

Dialogue is a process that lays the groundwork upon which sound policy and informed actions can be built. Attending to all 6 dimensions of dialogue requires discipline and dedication. It is this discipline, as well as the six dimensions that distinguish dialogue
from other forms of group communication. As Daniel Yankelovich points out in his book, *The Magic of Dialogue*, the absence of coercive influence, empathetic listening and laying bare assumptions are rarely present in ‘discussion’ and almost never present in ‘debate’. (p. 41) All 6 dimensions are potentially part of any dialogue experience, although different practitioners may stress certain aspects over others.

As co-founders of MIT’s Dialogue Group Ellinor and Gerard point out, dialogue is a “living technology” not a set of techniques. As they say:

Dialogue is ‘artful conversation’ crafted through the focusing of attention, attitudes, and behaviors that support authentic inquiry, (therefore) the art of dialogue is a living, interactive process. It is shaped by and shapes those who engage in it. (*Dialogue: Rediscover the Transforming Power of Conversation*, p. 61)

Illustration 3: The Three Domains of Dialogue

Dialogue entails not only words, but also the complex and hard to articulate feelings and motivations that lie beneath them. Because of this, dialogue always emerges in three inter-related domains.

This makes facilitating dialogue an ‘artful’ and interactive process, not a set of formulaic steps or techniques. Assisting a group in evolving their work in all three domains requires substantial insight and experience, flexibility, skilled judgment, and a willingness to give up some of the agenda-driven behaviors often associated with
standard facilitation. This report provides tools for facilitators who want to engage a group in what we coined as the art and craft of “Map-less Guiding.”

The facilitation goals of Map-less Guiding are fivefold:

- Help people do their best thinking and tap their deeper wisdom
- Create and maintain a safe dialogue environment that promotes equality of contributions, empathetic listening, and encourages the sharing of views
- Encourage group members to bring assumptions into the open
- Promote learning and new insights by helping groups see and pay attention to ‘creative tensions’
- Assist the group in identifying connections and evolving a greater sense of the whole

Within this report, we also talk about how to use dialogue to help groups make not only wiser, but more informed decisions regarding an action agenda. We describe how the CogniScope ™ process -- an innovative structured dialogue approach -- was integrated into our model to help a group identify not only their priorities, but also powerful leverage points for change. The rigor of the CogniScope ™ approach to structured dialogue and its built in technology support did much to increase both the scale and output of a dialogue event in a manner that honors the 6 dialogue dimensions as well as the intent of Map-less Guiding.

Finally, we offer a holistic framework for facilitated dialogue that outlines considerations for deriving the most impact from dialogue, and highlights some tools that TA providers, facilitators, and local leadership can use to achieve better results through dialogue.

II. Background on the Family Strengthening Dialogue Project

The Casey Foundation Making Connections Project is rooted in the notion that strong families are essential to the well being of communities, and, conversely, that neighborhood factors have a profound impact on the health of families. The Foundation has chosen to invest its resources in playing a catalytic role in communities that commit to this goal.

The demand for a family strengthening agenda is out there. After many unsuccessful attempts to improve the lives of children in isolation from other contextual factors, many people have come to the conclusion that reducing risks for children means – above all – reducing the vulnerability experienced by families in tough neighborhoods. Each Making Connections site has sought to stimulate and support a local movement on behalf of families that promotes efforts to strengthen families. Sites also help communities revisit policies and re-deploy resources to better connect families to support systems.
In launching the Making Connections initiative, the Foundation’s TARC was very aware of the need to better understand the potential role of TA and facilitation support to help people in communities arrive at a more profound and strategic understanding of ‘family strengthening’.

**The Task**

In the spring of 2000, TARC initiated conversations with Elena Pell on behalf of the Emerging Partnerships Group (EPG) regarding the role we could play in helping Making Connections sites grapple with family strengthening issues. We were asked to work with TARC to participate in the creation of a “Family Strengthening Tool Box”.

The TARC asked that EPG reflect on the following questions:

1) **What are the strategic questions that might help Making Connections sites carry out conversations about family strengthening?**

2) **How might such questions/inquiries be organized in potential tools and frameworks?**

3) **What are some ways to get groups to reflect on how to carry out this work in a manner that grows and expands their perspectives on these issues?**

4) **What skills are required to facilitate this work?**

With funding from TARC, EPG laid the groundwork for a Family Strengthening Dialogue Project.

**Goals of the Family Strengthening Dialogue Project**

In addressing the above questions, EPG identified the following goals:

- Make suggestions for how and why Making Connections neighborhoods might incorporate dialogue to enhance their family strengthening efforts

- Clarify distinctions between different approaches to dialogue, and between dialogue and other group deliberation approaches, and offer some insight as to when different approaches might be appropriate

- Explore and articulate elements of a Technical Assistance (TA) prototype showing how family strengthening dialogues can be integrated into a holistic TA/planning framework.
Why Dialogue?

Family Strengthening is invariably a multi-faceted effort. In order to build and support strong families, we must engage numerous stakeholders in developing a consensus of what needs to be done.

Famed public opinion expert Daniel Yankelovich talks about three “cultural fault lines” that get in the way of developing this kind of consensus:

- The way we increasingly distance ourselves from one another. He cites the ‘I-It’ way of relating which reduces the other to an object, as opposed to the “I-Thou” way of relating in which one sees the other as a person.
- The ‘silo effect’ – the tendency of our culture to fragment itself into subcultures so removed from one another as to isolate us into an aggregate of silos.
- The tendency to engage in too much ‘Top-Down Talk.’ By ‘Top-Down Talk’ he refers to “the chasm of misunderstanding and miscommunication that separates the nation’s elites from the general public.” He feels this is the most serious of the three fault lines, because “it doesn’t necessarily affect dialogue between the leaders themselves, but it plays havoc with relationships between leaders and their constituencies.” (PP 149- 155)

To build a local family strengthening agenda, we need to address these fault lines. We not only need to change institutional policies, support programs, neighborhood environments and economic realities, we need to change minds. We need new kinds of leadership to accomplish these goals. We need residents of these communities equipped to find their voice and take on new roles on behalf of their own communities. We need to build public will for a family strengthening agenda that will survive changing political currents and administrations. And, finally, we need champions who will carry this effort through good times and bad.

A New Kind of Leadership

Getting a family strengthening agenda off the ground requires a whole lot of people to converge on a commitment to the central role of families. It also requires communities to take on new responsibilities to create and leverage circumstances that support families.

Yankelovich coined the term “relational leadership” to describe how in modern communities, old command and control notions of leadership need to give way to emerging models that place emphasis on:

- Cooperation
- Dialogue
- Crossing boundaries
- Seeking alignment on shared vision
- Tolerating complexity
- Developing networks of relationships. (P 172).

There is already an emerging relational leadership in most Making Connections communities. Still, people do not easily move out of their silos into new and uncomfortable territory. Sometimes they step out, and then they retreat without having had the opportunity to truly make the necessary connections.

Lasting change depends on people who are in it all for the long haul -- champions who understand the larger picture, not only just their part of it.

A lot of organizations and political leaders have come to understand that residents have unique and powerful insights. Yet, residents of these neighborhoods -- especially the families -- are also often overlooked. Residents can become essential leaders and champions who, if provided voice and access, will help hold systems accountable and can be a powerful force for countering political and institutional drift.

**Building Public Will**

Changing the way communities view and support strong families also involves moving the conversation about strong families from private opinions to what Yankelovich calls “public judgment.” He characterizes public judgment as a stage in public discourse where an issue reaches a point where people become aware of the consequences of their opinions, and their views are no longer “mushy” and full of contradictions.

Public judgment is not only about having good information. In public judgment, facts and values become merged. As Yankelovich points out, in making a judgment, “most Americans take into account the facts as they understand them and their personal goals and moral values and their sense of what is best for others as well as themselves.” In his years of studying public opinion, he feels he has come to understand that the “creative processes whereby people convert raw opinion into considered judgments are essentially dialogic.” (P 181) He asserts that listening with empathy, equality, the absence of coercion, and laying bare assumptions – key features of dialogue --contribute to improving the quality of public judgment. He further argues that the quality of people’s opinions continually improves as they attend to the views and experiences of others through dialogue.

**Bridging Race/Class/Power Differences**

In the abstract, most everyone agrees that strong families are a ‘good thing.’ When these views are translated to real-life programs and policies, power and worldview differences fracture good intentions and impede results.

Once we scratch beneath the surface rhetoric, it becomes clear that although there are some areas of agreement, there is no widely held understanding of what it takes to build and support strong families. Views on the meaning of family strengthening are highly
influenced by class, race and cultural experiences, as well as where people find themselves in the overall power equation.

Dialogue is an investment in bridging differences in ways that do not shut down, or shut out, people with diverse experiences and worldviews. It will not solve all the issues. Still, strategic use of dialogue to help equalize power and voice in defining the family strengthening agenda can contribute to better, and more lasting, results for Making Connections neighborhoods.

**Why Isn’t There More Dialogue?**

**Our Blind Spot Regarding Public Input**

Yankelovich also talks about America’s political ‘blind-spot’ – the pervasive belief that an ill-informed public cannot make any significant contribution to policy because average citizens cannot conceivably possess the knowledge of professionals. In his view, this obstacle remains so difficult to surmount because it is, in part, based in reality. He declares:

> There are many occasions when the public really is so bogged down in inconsistent, moralistic, narrowly self-interested, and unrealistic wishful thinking that greater public engagement would make policy decisions worse, not better. (The Magic of Dialogue p. 174)

In the face of this, while leaders may be interested in learning how people *react* to the policy proposals they originate, they are reluctant to hear the public’s ideas or engage them as equals. Yankelovich points out that in citing this behavior he is “referring here not to leaders who are elitists or snobs, but to those who sincerely believe in democracy and are committed to sounding out their policies and proposals with the public.” (P.174)

He argues that there is some basis for this belief, and that it is “romantic nonsense” to assume that anyone who hasn’t given much thought to an issue is going to make a constructive contribution to it. We think this goes a bit far, but agree that without opportunities for dialogue, the public *is* at a disadvantage.

Reservations about direct democracy are often grounded in past experiences with somewhat unstructured and or poorly facilitated discussions with less advantaged people that *open up power/class/race dynamics without taking them anywhere that is useful.* Indeed if one attempts direct democracy without a framework and a robust process, groups can become mired in these dynamics.

Residents of distressed neighborhoods in particular are caught in a serious and damaging double bind. Policymakers and leaders at all levels aren’t truly engaging residents because they believe that they have few constructive ideas to offer and they fear ‘opening up’ difficult dynamics. Because these same people are unwilling to invest in
creating appropriate forums and attendant processes for residents to formulate their ideas, they create a self-fulfilling prophecy that justifies their bias.

The people who make decisions on policies and programs that affect families at every level of the system are often unaware of this blind spot and, because of this, are perpetuating its power.

**Dialogue is not Understood**

It is not well understood that dialogue is a distinct methodology geared towards specific results. Most people, even experienced administrators, tend to use the terms dialogue, conversation, discussion, deliberation and consultation interchangeably to describe any situation that brings together a group of folks to ‘talk’ about an issue. In fact the different modalities produce very different results.

The term dialogue is often used to describe large-scale meetings (conferences, summits, etc.) that bring together a variety of people to discuss a theme or topic. Some are dubious about the claims that large-scale meetings have a real impact. We believe they can, but that it is an issue of what one is trying to achieve.

Large scale meetings can create excitement about and awareness of an issue, support and contribute to network building, gauge interest in an issue or topic, air views about an issue, and – at least for the duration of the event – create a strong sense of community and good will among the participants (and towards the conveners). These are important goals, and the methodologies that are used to make large-scale meetings effective can go a long way to achieving these results.

Indeed, dialogue can and does take place in the context of large scale meetings, but the fact of the events themselves does not guarantee that the types of results that dialogue is capable of producing will indeed come about. Dialogue implies a committed group effort; large-scale meetings do not generally in-and-of-themselves lead to the deeper understanding, committed new champions, or the identification and resolution of tough issues that arise from sustained dialogue.

Dialogue is also often confused with deliberation, discussion or debate. Using the following chart, Ellinor and Gerard point out the key distinctions between dialogic forms of communication and discussion/debate.
The Conversation Continuum  
Dialogic communication vs. Discussion and Debate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dialogue</th>
<th>Discussion/Debate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Seeing the whole among the parts</td>
<td>Breaking issues/problems into parts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeing the connection between the parts</td>
<td>Seeing distinctions between the parts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inquiring into assumptions</td>
<td>Justifying/defending assumptions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning through inquiry and disclosure</td>
<td>Persuading, selling, telling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creating shared meaning among many</td>
<td>Gaining agreement on one meaning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ellinor and Gerard, *Dialogue: Rediscover the Transforming Power of Conversation*, page 21

As Ellinor and Gerard point out, most informal conversations include a mixture of dialogic and discussion-based ways of communicating. They also note that none of the distinct characteristics of dialogue in themselves make a conversation a dialogue. Rather, “it is all of them combined that give it its unique quality and feel.” (p. 26)

Because the outcomes of the modalities are so different, it is particularly important to get clear on the different objectives of and intentions behind discussion and dialogue.

**When discussion is most appropriate**

Discussion is an appropriate methodology for consultation – for getting a group to ‘toss around’ an idea before someone ‘makes the call.’ on the ‘right’ answer or solution. In a discussion, participants are given the opportunity to lobby and persuade leadership that their idea offers the best and perhaps the only solution to the problem in question. This can be a viable and useful methodology in certain situations. Consultation through discussion works when an immediate decision *must be made* about an issue or when the problem is well defined and lends itself to technical solutions.

**When dialogue is most appropriate**

Dialogue is part of a decisionmaking *process*, not a decisionmaking tool. Dialogue is a tool for laying the groundwork for better decisions because it evolves a diversity of perspectives before attempting to achieve consensus. Dialogue enhances and does not supplant the effectiveness of decisionmaking and action-planning methodologies that may involve discussion and consultation.
Dialogue is necessary in situations where deeper and more widely shared insights into an issue will become paramount for addressing the issue over the long run. Dialogue can be used to build consensus, but its path to consensus is geared more to sustainable understandings and strategic relationships rather than quick answers. The methodology of dialogue is suited to situations where issues are complex, the timeline is sustained, the challenges of the diversity of views are formidable, and where leadership is committed to playing a catalytic rather than a directing role in the formulation of the change agenda.

For example, a dialogue on family strengthening would open up different points of view based on the perspectives and experiences of the different stakeholders. The goal would be to forge a consensus that deals realistically with the complexity of moving such an agenda forward. The desired result of building dialogue into the overall change process for family strengthening would be to produce a shared understanding and a sense of stake among key groups of stakeholders. The goal of dialogue in this case would be to deepen perspectives regarding the roots of family strengthening, to understand how the strength of families is connected to other issues, policies, values, and experiences, and to understand how everyone is affected by the successes and failures of the family system in a particular community.

**The Tyranny of Time**

One of the greatest challenges to enabling diverse groups of people to address complex issues is the tyranny of time. People who live and/or work in distressed neighborhoods care about these issues and are inclined to do something about factors that make it difficult for children and families to thrive, simply don’t have enough time. So many things need to be done by so many people that it seems like there is never enough time to go around. In addition to their day-to-day work, community organizations and resident volunteers are often involved in untold numbers of collaborations, advisory groups and meeting after meeting to address the myriad issues that are connected to their efforts.

The tyranny of time is not a fixed variable. Time and its uses are affected by the availability of resources. Expanded resources for staffing and professional development can make a real difference. Increased staffing reduces time pressures, and professional development can help people work smarter, not harder. In any case, the tyranny of time is not only a matter of workplace pressures, but also those of home and family. Many employees on the staff of community organizations are caught up in the same struggles that concern their clients.

We think it is questionable whether in the long run dialogue eats up more of people’s time than the alternatives. Dialogue takes time but so does trying to redo or undo efforts that were not based on a genuine understanding of how things connect. Reaching sustainable agreements based on a rich diversity of perspectives is worth the time.
Greater effort should be made to support people and organizations in the midst of change agendas; we must devote the necessary time it takes to build sustainable agreements.

**Putting Out Fires**

People often make choices based on problems that are right in front of them or on the visible horizon. Dialogue works off of a different horizon. Dialogue is designed to lift people’s perspectives on an issue. Dialogue participants customarily have some clarity about the issue that they are trying to tackle, and may even have a sense of the ideal state that they envision for the future. They are, however, engaging in an evolutionary process that takes time and a process in which the endpoint may be a surprise.

Americans tend not to like to work this way. We like quick fixes. We want to be absolutely clear about results before we even explore the problem. We are uncomfortable with ambiguity and tend to be impatient. The ‘big picture’ is too abstract. Businesses have been forced to counter this tendency in order to survive in fiercely competitive markets. They can’t afford to save just one tree when the forest is burning. We can’t either. We can’t be so focused on the problems right in front of us that we forget the long view.

**Choosing a Pilot Site**

Once we agreed that the Family Strengthening Dialogue Project might best assist the Foundation by exploring and documenting the uses of dialogue in actual sites, TARC put EPG in touch with two Making Connections communities -- Louisville and St. Louis – for evaluation as possible test sites for a small-scale pilot. Both communities had key players who had already approached the Foundation for technical assistance in formulating their ideas about family strengthening.¹

By May 2000 it was determined that Louisville offered the best fit. The Urban Neighborhood Centers Alliance of Louisville (UNCAL) had engaged in several conversations with Sammy Moon, site team manager for The Louisville Making Connections Site, and expressed a keen interest in having the Foundation work with them to explore family strengthening issues.

As settlement houses, UNCAL members had a long tradition of serving Louisville’s neediest families and advancing the development of the city’s youth. In doing so, they have involved neighborhood residents in planning services and programs. UNCAL wanted to build upon that history to develop an agenda to further promote family strengthening efforts in their own organizations and in the community.

¹ EPG was also interested in observing how the San Antonio MC site was using a dialogic approach to promoting family strengthening in a Latino community. Time and resource restraints ultimately prevented us from adding a second pilot effort to the design.
Beginning in the late spring 2000, the Family Strengthening Dialogue Project engaged with UNCAL and Making Connections to conduct a pilot project. We worked with UNCAL to design a series of interweaving dialogues on issues of family strengthening and provided continuous technical assistance in planning and follow up activities related to the dialogues. Activities included:

- Diagnostic interviews with UNCAL leadership and staff
- Facilitated dialogues with UNCAL leadership
- Dialogues with adult residents from five Louisville neighborhoods
- Separate dialogues with youth from five Louisville neighborhoods
- A two-day Family Strengthening Dialogue Retreat with UNCAL leadership and staff
- Action planning meetings with UNCAL
- Helping UNCAL directors design a feedback loop with residents who participated in dialogues
- A dialogue design consultation with forty UNCAL staff from the five agencies
- A 1-½ day UNCAL Family Strengthening Dialogue Summit that brought together adult and youth residents, staff, board members and UNCAL Directors to take part in a structured dialogue with technology support.

**Results of the Pilot**

The dialogue activities in Louisville pilot were conducted over the course of a year. Even though the Family Strengthening Dialogue Project was engaged in what was primarily a learning agenda around the process of dialogue, the pilot phase of this work produced some important results. This experience has led to a deeper understanding of a family strengthening agenda among participants. In dialogue settings, residents easily made the connection between the health of families and relevance and availability of their various support structures, both formal and informal. Dialogues also elevated the importance of place and race in planning, two dimensions of this work that Doug Nelson has identified as essential components of the Making Connections perspective.

One of the most interesting findings in Louisville that emerged from resident dialogues was that, when given the benefit of a dialogue setting and facilitation support to get their ideas expressed, resident’s views on family strengthening were very much in alignment with what we know about these issues. The people closest to the problems of families – the families themselves – understand very well what is challenging family integrity. They were able to speak in profound ways about the primacy of the family, and the many factors that make it difficult for families to function effectively on behalf of children. (Findings from Resident Dialogues/Staff interviews can be found in Attachment A.)

Since the pilot, UNCAL has continued to build on its work. UNCAL has become involved in carrying the message of family strengthening within the shifting political...
climate of a merged local government in Louisville. They are also exploring how they can support resident-driven research into family issues and are requesting peer TA to learn more about best practices for engaging residents. In subsequent work with UNCAL as a member of the site team, Elena Pell conducted training with staff and residents associated with UNCAL to introduce them to some basic concepts for facilitating dialogue, skills which they have since utilized with staff and resident groups.

The Team

The core planning team for the pilot consisted of the five Executive Directors that comprise UNCAL, Sammy Moon, and Elena Pell on behalf the Emerging Partnerships Group. In these initial stages Susan Batten, representing the TARC, worked closely with the core team to launch the project and help frame the agenda.

It is important to mention the pivotal role that the UNCAL and the site team leader played in the pilot. The Family Strengthening Dialogue Project only covered Elena Pell’s time and expenses. Resources to cover meeting costs, additional consultants, staff time, and other related expenses were all leveraged. UNCAL devoted substantial unfunded staff time to the effort, and the settlement houses freed up a large portion of a senior staff person’s time to take part in the planning and design work for the staff consultation and Dialogue Summit. As site team leader, Sammy Moon demonstrated faith in this process by putting resources behind it at the local level. He covered all the meeting expenses as well as the costs of bringing in other consultants to work with us when needed.

EPG has been committed to the notion of conducting the Family Strengthening Dialogue project in a way that would contribute to ongoing learning. As the project unfolded, several individuals associated with Making Connections joined the project to contribute to, and benefit from, the learning that was taking place. TARC consultant Judy Langford came in as an observer during the Dialogue Retreat, providing us with excellent feedback and a detailed summary of the meeting proceedings from an outside perspective. Jen Zapf from CAPD came in as an observer for the Dialogue Summit. Sammy Moon also provided funds to bring Debbie Chase, a St. Louis-based consultant to Making Connections, to work with EPG over the first six months. Debbie Chase provided valuable assistance in conceptualizing and carrying out the initial work of the project. This also provided an opportunity for the St. Louis site to benefit directly from the knowledge gained by the Louisville team as the project unfolded. Sammy Moon was engaged as a learning partner in every stage of the pilot. His contribution to the design was vital to the success of this effort. Finally, we seized upon numerous opportunities to

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2 EPG was also able to forge an agreement whereby CWA Ltd. donated 4 days pro bono to the Louisville Site Team so that the group could experience the CogniScope™ approach. Elena Pell worked with the site team to design a full-day session that would use the Cogniscope™ approach to tackle this question: “In the context of the Making Connections belief system, what are the guiding principles for enhancing our communications with and the involvement of the community of stakeholders in Louisville?” The site team leader felt that this process produced powerful enough results that he budgeted another day-long follow-up Cogniscope™ session with the site team and other stakeholders two months later.
engage local participants in the learning partnership. Local participants were involved in planning and design of dialogue events, as participant observers during sessions, and in the numerous debriefing meetings from which we gleaned many of our learnings.

**Introducing a New Structured Dialogue Approach into the Work**

The pilot project also provided the opportunity for EPG to experiment with ways to integrate a technology-supported approach to structured dialogue into its work. The CogniScope™ methodology was created by CWA, Ltd. based in Paoli, Pennsylvania in response to the increasing complexity and risk of engaging stakeholders in designing and planning social systems, especially inter-organizational collaborations. The CogniScope™ is a codified and tested means of collaboratively defining a complex situation and developing a social contract amongst the situation’s representative stakeholders. The CogniScope™ has been used for many diverse applications with government, private industry and international philanthropy.

The methodology imposes a technology-supported discipline of focused and open dialogue, which they refer to as “technologue.” Aided by their Cognisystem software, a group of stakeholders is able to generate and clarify large data sets of observations regarding a situation, balance contributions, collaboratively discern collective challenges, and construct patterns of interaction amongst participant’s observations.

The following graphic illustrates the steps in the CogniScope process:

![Illustration 4: The CogniScope™ Process](image)

In response to a generating question (see Section IV for a detailed description of the role of generating questions in dialogue), participants described fifty-nine action statements that could be taken. The group was then engaged in a round of activity in which each person was given an opportunity to clarify the meaning of their statement to the entire group. The CogniScope™ helps groups do what we call “platforming” by visually presenting ‘idea’ patterns: based on these clarified meanings, action statements were grouped into idea clusters and presented visually across the wall for discussion and validation. Each participant then chose five actions from this entire set, ranking them from 1 to 5 (most important to least important) priorities.
The group was then exposed to priority action items in sets of two. They were asked to respond to the following question: Would action on X idea, significantly enhance the achievement of Y? With the technology support, the group was quickly able to determine a pattern of influence among the ideas. They then discovered and discussed the three activities that would actually provide the most leverage in moving the overall agenda forward. More information on the CogniScope™ can be found in Attachment C.

III. Challenges Encountered in The Course of The Louisville Pilot

The design and implementation of the Louisville pilot for the Family Strengthening Project was not uncomplicated. Nor was it 100% successful. In the course of this pilot, we learned a great deal, not only about what worked but also about what didn’t. As in life itself, the truest lessons are often learned from the most difficult challenges.

EPG has identified some areas that presented the greatest difficulties. These challenges and our ideas for addressing them have informed the creation of the holistic framework that is outlined in the second part of Section IV.

Sustaining Momentum

The purpose of the pilot program was, in large part, to create and test the framework that we present in Section IV. The fact that we were developing a framework as well as implementing it affected momentum.

Nevertheless, even without a research and development agenda, some amount of lag time is inevitable in a process like this. Scheduling difficulties increase logarithmically in direct proportion to the number of participants involved. These problems are exacerbated because, in this type of work, we are almost never working within the context of a single organization. It would be easy to schedule a monthly, weekly or even daily meeting for a group who worked together in one location. In fact, this kind of recurring meeting is a common facet of modern business life. However, we were faced with reconciling the schedules of UNCAL staff from five different organizations, Casey staff, TA providers and residents. This is not an uncommon number and mix of participants for Making Connections sites.

During this project, we several times had to take specific steps to reenergize the process. Having a more developed framework should significantly decrease the amount of design and development time for future events. Nevertheless, momentum will probably always be an issue. For this reason, a framework for dialogue needs to pay almost as much attention to what happens between dialogue events as to what happens during them.

The Tyranny of Time

In an earlier section of this report, we spoke about the ‘tyranny of time’ that hinders attempts to move a group through a facilitated dialogue. The leadership of UNCAL
understood this from the outset and expressed a willingness to hang in there for the long run.

In planning the Dialogue Retreat and the Dialogue Summit, there was considerable discussion regarding the time to be allotted for each. Even though everyone agreed we needed ample time for dialogue, this needed to be balanced with concerns about the time pressures that this would create for staff.

The initial proposed design called for a 1-½ day event for the Dialogue Retreat, and a two-day event for the Dialogue Summit. In both cases, the end design of the events was shorter than this. After attending to introductions, meals, icebreakers, etc. the Retreat ended up with six hours actually devoted to dialogue instead of nine. Actual dialogue time at the Summit was four hours less than recommended.

In her role as observer at the Dialogue Retreat, Judy Langford made a series of observations and recommendations. She suggested that even though the group adequately addressed priority-setting and next step issues, the process could have greatly benefited from an additional session to produce more specific timelines and responsibilities that built off of the insights gained during the dialogue. To these recommendations, she added: “… these alternatives, however, would have required much more time than was available!”

As was pointed out earlier, dialogue is a technique that balances spiritual, linguistic (cognitive), and emotional domains of experience. In order to work effectively with a larger and more diverse group, we integrated the CogniScope™ structured dialogue method into the overall design of the Dialogue Summit. The design and technology support of this dialogue approach greatly expands a group’s capacity in the cognitive/linguistic domain. This process was successful and quickly laid important groundwork for UNCAL’s action planning efforts around family strengthening.

Nevertheless, because we were working with less time overall, we made the decision to fit all the CogniScope™ structured dialogue sessions into one day. So, although a lot of attention was paid to covering the different domains in the overall experience, there was a considerable amount of time spent on the cognitive/linguistic domain in the second day. This became difficult for some of the participants who are not quite as accustomed to slogging through demanding and long sessions where the work is primarily form the ‘head,’ not the ‘heart’ and ‘soul.’ A number of participants said that although they really liked the overall experience, that second day became difficult for them.

As a result, EPG has worked with CWA to rethink how we would design the overall format for such a summit. We have agreed that in order to build on the obvious strength of their tool, we must have meetings that are, at a minimum, two days long, with activities to address the spiritual and emotional domains interspersed between CogniScope sessions.
While the difficulties with time may be a fact of life for these kinds of efforts, we need to look hard at what is actually an appropriate balance. A number of important issues that arose during these events had to be dealt with in subsequent meetings where it was difficult to re-create the benefits of having a diverse group’s ideas. What seems like a time savings can actually result in undoing, recreating or redoing work that could have been accomplished by the group if the work had been allotted an adequate time frame.

Building Relational Leadership and Local Champions

As pointed out earlier, the Family Strengthening agenda requires the emergence of “relational leadership”. Although numerous connections were made and there is evidence of greater shared leadership among the UNCAL organizations, more attention could have been paid to developing broader relational leadership. Although we did widen the dialogue across UNCAL organizations, staff, residents and youth, more could have been done to foster linkages and partnerships between UNCAL and other neighborhood organizations.

Building champions among the residents was also challenging. It should be clarified that creating significant leadership among residents to advocate for strong families in Louisville through the dialogue process would have required an investment that far outstripped the resources of our pilot project. Although there are deep connections among Louisville residents even in the toughest neighborhoods, there had historically been little community organizing investment. Resident-driven grass roots activities tended to be small-scale and disconnected.

In spite of long-term and quality relationships with residents in the neighborhoods, UNCAL, like most other providers, were unsure how to work with residents. As one Director stated in the first diagnostic interview, “We have relationships with these families, but we haven't much of a formal one. We really need some mechanisms for knowing how to effectively partner with families.” They were additionally concerned that bringing staff and families together in the same room prematurely to work through these issues might create hard feelings. Some of the residents I later spoke to agreed. Nevertheless, we now think there were several missed opportunities to cultivate and support emerging resident leaders.

It may be largely a matter of time. As we pointed out earlier, since the end of the Louisville pilot, UNCAL has undertaken many steps to begin to address precisely these issues.

Doing More With Youth

The Louisville pilot paid specific attention to including youth in the overall process. EPG designed and carried out youth dialogues, and pioneered some ideas for how to integrate youth into a larger-scale dialogue in meaningful ways. For example, in the Dialogue Summit, we suggested that UNCAL arrange to have youth participants interview peers about family prior to the dialogue. In designing the dialogue, we set
aside time and space before the event for youth to conduct their own icebreaker and
design a closing ceremony for the first evening that would amplify their message about
family strengthening for the adults.

Addressing the special concerns of youth and their unique perspectives and
communication styles carries with it its own unique challenges. While UNCAL has had
and continues to enjoy good and healthy relationships with the youth of their
neighborhoods, it would have benefited greatly if we could have worked with them to
develop even more explicit strategies and goals for youth involvement.

IV. A Holistic Approach to Facilitated Family Strengthening
Dialogues

Illustration 5: Map-less Guiding: tools and techniques

Map-less Guiding: the need for facilitated dialogues

Why we need facilitated dialogue

Some of the literature on dialogue presumes that it does not require formal facilitation.
The assumption is that groups can learn to address the dimensions of dialogue on their
own. We are convinced that facilitation is necessary. Before we highlight tools for
facilitation through Map-less Guiding, we want to address the assumptions that have led
some practitioners to believe that groups are not well served by facilitation.

First, because much of the current work on dialogue has come from the field of
organizational development, there is often an assumption that groups share an
organizational culture, e.g. a traditional business. A shared organizational culture may
indeed generate more clarity regarding the nature of a task. A group of people who share
an organizational setting can also engage in sustained relationship building, and they
may be able to access training support to enable participants to gain mastery in the skills
of dialogue.
The complexity of the issues that are related to family strengthening is greater. In the case of family strengthening conversations, the people who need to forge common understandings about how to support and build strong families usually do not share an organizational culture. In most cases, we are attempting to engage highly diverse groups whose life circumstances, experiences and worldviews are quite different. Far more obstacles to seeing eye-to-eye or sustaining momentum exist in neighborhood or inter-agency settings than in a typical workplace.

Furthermore, for a lot of people, it is also a relatively new conversation. People know they care about these issues, but many that live and work in tough neighborhoods have never had the opportunity to truly examine the connections between all the factors that impede or benefit strong families.

Second, there is an underlying assumption in much of the writing about dialogue that the sheer power of the experience of dialogue itself will insure that the group will remain committed to one another and will produce high quality results.

In this view, the energy and commitment of the group is sufficient to help the group work through the inevitable tough issues that surface in dialogue. In fact, there are practitioners who are concerned that facilitation is not only unnecessary; they contend that it gets in the way. William Isaacs expresses his trepidation about facilitated dialogue in “Dialogue And The Art Of Thinking Together” (p. 264):

> Meeting facilitation...can become a kind of crutch, a way of bypassing the crisis...While it is not always the case, reliance on facilitators can be a kind of work avoidance... with a false hope that there is some method, some expert, some technology that can actually get us from here to there...

The spiritual and emotional domains of dialogue – and the energies that are generated by group learning – are indeed powerful for sustaining a group. Nevertheless, in dealing with the complexities of a social change agenda we are far from convinced that we do justice to groups by forcing them to work out for themselves how to do and sustain dialogue. The danger in these cases is not only that the groups may fail to achieve the best results from dialogue, but that the group itself may simply disintegrate.

Furthermore, groups who must attend to their own process at the same time they are dealing with issues are simply less efficient. As seasoned group process consultant Adele Simmons points out in her book, *A Safe Place for Dangerous Truths: Using Dialogue to Overcome Fear and Distrust at Work*, groups, on their own, suffer “process losses”. Research has demonstrated that “most groups perform well below the capacity of the smartest member.” Although group performance is not at the lowest common denominator, groups usually perform at a level just above the mean intellect. Simmons cites facilitated dialogue as the mechanism for minimizing the two biggest factors that contribute to process loss: low tolerance for the frustration of uncertainty, and the related tendency to want to rush to closure. (p. 10)
So groups who are dealing with tough issues, contradictions and ‘dangerous truths’ require intervention to ‘get from here to there’. We assert that it is not a matter of whether a facilitator can make a difference in these situations; it is how that facilitator manages intervention that is important.

Inexperienced or ‘old-school’ meeting facilitators indeed sometimes mistake their role as that of a crutch. A ‘facilitator-as-crutch’ unconsciously, or consciously, engages in two practices that get in the way of dialogue. They provide ‘expert’ advice to resolve the group’s problems for them, and remove the sources of frustration that would impede the group’s achieving ‘quick closure’ on contentious issues.

This is not to say that expertise is never needed, just that it is not the facilitator’s role to be the ‘expert’ within a dialogue setting. In our TA work with UNCAL outside of a dialogue setting, we have provided and leveraged expert advice to help them tackle specific goals that are identified by the group. For instance, we have provided them access to a member of the site team who has experience and knowledge in resident-driven research. The demand for the expert advice is not driven by a need to provide easy answers or to bypass difficult dynamics, but to deal with a more specific definable goal at an appropriate juncture in their overall change process.

Facilitation approaches that rush towards a goal encourage and enable groups to sidestep tough issues and avoid the ‘real work.’ Because they actively avoid dealing with the issues and concern that underlie tough issues and conflicts, they are often subtly coercive, and will shut down members of the group who become increasingly aware of what the ‘real deal’ is. This is not Map-less Guiding.

**The Facilitator as Map-less Guide**

It is not a “false hope” that process facilitation can help groups get “from here to there”. The use of facilitation to increase efficiency of a group process does not prevent teams from doing the hard work. It helps them.

We believe that labeling facilitation as a “false hope” is like saying that the Scientific Method prevents scientists from solving problems. In facilitation as in science, a method can be used to clear the path to great intuitive breakthroughs. It is not the tool that is presents the problem; it is how the practitioner uses the tool.

Our best and most productive investments in the family strengthening conversation are to facilitate the emergence of new forms of local leadership through Map-less Guiding and thoughtful technical assistance.

EPG chose the term Map-less Guiding for the type of facilitation we use because it addresses several dimensions of what is required of effective dialogue facilitators. It is ‘Map-less’ because the role of the facilitator is to evolve an interactive design experience, rather than to take the group down a prescribed road. In other words, it
presumes that the design landscape will become clearer as the knowledge and wisdom within the group is applied to the question at hand. ‘Guiding’ refers to the careful application of group process tools to assist the group in its task.

**The facilitation goals of Map-less Guiding are five-fold:**

- Help people do their best thinking and tap their deeper wisdom
- Create and maintain a safe dialogue environment that promotes equality of contributions, empathetic listening, and encourages the sharing of views
- Encourage group members to bring assumptions into the open
- Promote learning and new insights by helping groups see and pay attention to ‘creative tensions’
- Assist the group in identifying connections and evolving a greater sense of the whole

In this section, we highlight facilitation considerations and techniques for serving as a Map-less Guide for dialogue groups. It is our hope that the relationships in these communities will build to a point where they will set aside the time, develop the skills and find the motivation to engage in meaningful dialogue on their own. However, this is not current state of affairs.

This is not to imply that there isn’t a lot discussion, debate and deliberation about family strengthening. Our concern is that in the absence of facilitated dialogue we consign all but the most brave, articulate and vocal leadership to a secondary role in shaping the policies, programs and solutions we seek. If we want to build a family strengthening social movement in communities that produces the kinds of long-lasting and system-wide results we aspire to, we have to do better than that.

**Techniques for Map-less Guiding: Facilitation Considerations for the 6 Dimensions of Dialogue**

In the Louisville pilot, EPG worked with the core team to explore and refine tools for Facilitated Dialogue. We do not detail the vast number of tools that most experienced facilitators already have on hand to balance discussion, encourage participation, etc. This report concentrates on sharing those techniques and skills that an experienced facilitator can add to their ‘toolbox’ to serve as Map-less Guides for groups that are engaging in dialogue.

**Considerations and Techniques for Map-less Guiding**

This section relates how we developed, implemented, and adapted facilitation techniques to reinforce the six dimensions of dialogue in real-life settings. We also include a description of how EPG successfully addressed the problem of scale in a larger, more diverse dialogue setting by integrating a technology supported approach to structured
dialogue-- the CogniScope™ -- into our model. This integrated approach quickly produced a strong and clearly understandable convergence of ideas among a diverse community of stakeholders, leading to a focused effort by UNCAL to take their work to the next level.

We organized the following discussion of tools for facilitated dialogue according to the 6 dimensions of dialogue identified in Section I.

**Equality and the absence of coercive influence**

Facilitators can play an important role in helping groups achieve equality and to offset the tendency for some members of the group to exert a coercive influence over one another.

Most experienced facilitators have a variety of tools and techniques they use to promote a more equal and ‘fair’ atmosphere in a group. For instance, it is a common facilitation practice to work with the group to set up agreed upon group norms for behavior at the outset of a meeting. We do not do group norm-building exercises. Nevertheless, we do suggest that facilitators develop a process for making the group aware of, and compelled by, all 6 dimensions of dialogue. The best approach for this is an interactive training session prior to dialogue that helps people integrate the concepts through practice and the use of examples.

Skilled facilitators are also aware that their own attitude and stance deeply affects the group’s dynamic. In dialogue the facilitator role is a catalytic role, not a decisionmaking one. As we detailed earlier, in our Map-less Guiding approach we feel that dialogue cannot be achieved if the facilitator sets himself or herself up a “content” expert during the dialogue. In Map-less Guiding, the facilitator’s job is to help the group sustain good process (in service to the group) and assumes that you have the right people in the room to explore the issue. Additional expertise is indeed helpful to a group’s work outside of dialogue, but introducing this factor into the dialogue setting is usually problematical.³

Simple techniques, such as the use of traditional round robins or the use of ‘talking sticks’ can contribute to promoting an atmosphere where each contribution is honored. However, a toolbox of time-honored techniques is not sufficient if a facilitator is inexperienced with dealing with the often-subtle power dynamics at play in group settings. A great deal boils down to experience: seasoned facilitators can spot, and flexibly deal with, power dynamics in ways that don’t get in the way of the group’s work. Conferring with other facilitators and insightful participant observers at strategic

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³ In other work, Elena Pell and consultant Hedy Chang have experimented with setting up facilitation teams with a ‘process facilitator’ and ‘content facilitator’ working together. In order to be effective, this sort of teaming needs to be carefully managed. In this facilitation model, the content expertise presents itself not as a source of answers for the group, but as a source of strategic questions and occasional points of information that help the group deepen its thinking in a content area. Contributions regarding content are still always in the service of group’s process. Although this particular teaming experience was successful, EPG feels that there is still a great deal that needs to be learned about this type of teaming. This approach is more suited to decision-making forums that may follow a dialogue, rather than the dialogue itself.
junctures can also help facilitators navigate these issues more effectively. We employed both strategies at different junctures in our dialogue work with good results.

The CogniScope™ approach goes further to safeguard equality and the absence of coercive influence among participants. Their approach enforces a norm where the autonomy and authenticity of each participant’s contributions is carefully guarded. Protecting people’s contributions means no one is permitted to revise or re-interpret the meaning of another person’s statement. Participants are only permitted to seek clarification, although there are other opportunities to capture different points of view in relation to an idea.

First, in the CogniScope™ approach, it is the facilitator’s role to enforce this norm when violated, and they will literally walk over and ‘protect’ that person’s space while reminding the group that their dialogue process does not allow for this norm to be violated. Second, a detailed record of each person’s contribution is kept throughout the process, and is regularly referred to in order to clarify the meaning of his or her statements. This is no small accomplishment. During the Summit, participants described fifty-nine actions they thought were relevant to the task, and were given opportunity to clarify the meaning of every one of them during sessions with the entire group.

It should be noted that participants in the Dialogue Summit, particularly residents and staff, spoke of the CogniScope facilitator’s very active approach to “protecting the autonomy and authenticity of each person’s contributions” as one of the most powerful, and empowering, aspects of their structured dialogue experience. Several African American staff members and one white adult resident later told us that this was the first time that they had experienced a genuine level playing field in a meeting setting.

**Listening with empathy**

As is the case with encouraging equality, Map-less Guiding a group through empathetic listening has as much to do with the tone the facilitator sets as with specific techniques.

EPG employed two techniques to promote empathetic listening among dialogue groups we worked with in Louisville. In both of the larger dialogues (the retreat and the summit) we engaged the group in a “Listening Pairs” exercise. This is an exercise that we learned from the late Aliah Mubarak Tharpe who made important contributions to the practice of promoting diversity and equity in groups.

Listening pairs is a common technique in which the group is split into pairs, everyone is given a subject to discuss, one member of the pair expresses how they feel about the subject, then they switch roles. We use listening pairs in a different way. Even though listening pairs are asked to address a topic (Why are strong families important?), the object of the exercise goes beyond having an opportunity to clarify their perspectives with another person. Pairs are requested to get “up close and personal” and not to speak until the other is finished with their two or three minute opportunity to speak. We
usually (and half jokingly, but we are not really kidding) ask them to give that person their loving attention. The constraints of the exercise are designed to give participants a powerful experience of empathetic listening. In debriefing the exercise, a great deal of care is taken to draw out people’s reactions to the experience of listening and being heard in this way.

Empathetic listening also involves caring. It is difficult for people to care deeply about other people’s experiences and views when they are related in a superficial way. It is simply not compelling. To address this problem, Map-less Guiding involves creating an atmosphere of trust. Among other things, this means the facilitator can’t hold themselves “above” the group. One way a facilitator can effectively communicate safety is through disclosure of a very personal issue that closes the “experience gap” between facilitator and participants. Disclosure formed an important aspect of closing the experience gap in the Resident (youth and adult) dialogues. Following the Dialogue Retreat, Judy Langford wrote in her report to us that during a session when the group was sharing personal reflections about families, the session was “bland and uneven” until Elena Pell stepped in and shared an intensely personal reflection. She noted that “this led to many other comments and a much deeper discussion…” The decision to use disclosure to move that dialogue to a deeper and more compelling level was a deliberate act of Map-less Guiding. Disclosure can be a useful step to take with a group, but knowing when to use it and what to disclose requires a delicate judgment call. In the spirit of Map-less Guiding, it must always be done in service to the group and their work.

**Bringing assumptions into the open**

Issues that people care deeply about come from past experiences, “mental models”, and emotions that are sometimes difficult to articulate. One way to help groups bring assumptions into the open is to identify powerful themes that help people “unpack” this baggage.

A number of dialogue and dialogic approaches build on themes. Most also go to great pains to identify a ‘convening’, ‘framing’, ‘triggering’, or what we have come to call generating question.

A generating question is not just a topic; it is a powerful question that is carefully designed to energize the group’s thinking around an issue. Developing a generating question is both an art and a science. The generating question should be designed so that it provokes genuine and heartfelt contributions. It also needs to create a ‘frame’ that sets some beginning parameters for the dialogue. This question must also be broad enough that everyone can elaborate on it from his or her own perspective. For the Dialogue Summit, a core team developed the following generating question for that dialogue experience:

“What are the actions that will support and promote the strengthening of our families if undertaken by our community of stakeholders?
The use of a generating question in a Map-less Guiding facilitation process is not primarily concerned with keeping the group on topic. It is more often used to support group members in the process of understanding and articulating the origins of their ideas and perspectives.

Map-less Guiding also uses Probing Questions to take participants on an inward journey that delves more deeply into the implications of the generating question. For example, we ask very general and gentle questions to help surface underlying assumptions. “Hmm, why is that?” “When did this change for you?” “Are there things that are not being said here?” etc. To participants, this should come across as spontaneous, conversational and merely inquisitive, never contrived or judgmental.

**Developing new insights into how ideas relate**

The dialogue experience is not mechanical or linear. Groups don’t simply ‘complete’ one topic, and then go onto the next, and so on and so forth. Dialogue involves an interweaving of ideas and perspectives. As dialogue evolves, ideas and the connections between them sometimes become so powerful as to form a ‘net’ that can potentially elevate the group to a new and higher level. This “net” comprises the group’s understanding about the nature of the theme, and how the different ideas relate. Often those insights are so striking that they seem palpable.

Sometimes, however, the “net” is elusive. Particularly when we are bridging race/culture/class/professional realities, the net is like a scrim that people can sense, but they cannot attach a common language to. The facilitator as Map-less Guide plays an important role in helping people see underlying connections and discover language. To help address this dimension of dialogue, Map-less Guides use Prompt Questions to help participants and the group as a whole explores how ideas relate. Facilitation can also play an important role in “translating” ideas.4

**Help people deal with creative tensions**

Creative facilitation teams engaged in Map-less Guiding go to a lot of trouble to insure that different perspectives and worldviews emerge throughout the process. Inevitably, this brings to light paradoxes and creative tensions as different experiences and mental

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4 “Translation” requires a high degree of cross-systems experience and cultural competence. Different races, cultures, classes and professions often use different language to express what may be similar sentiments. Map-less Guiding is difficult if the facilitator does not have some insight into different worldviews and experience with facilitating dialogues between diverse groups. Much excellent writing has been done on cultural competence for TA providers. The work in cultural competence has contributed to the ability of TA providers to be dialogue facilitators. Additional insights into diversity and equity issues and the attendant role of TA providers can be found in the California Tomorrow publications *The Implications of Diversity for Technical Assistance* and *Walking the Walk* cited in the attached list of resources.
models collide. For example, the UNCAL Dialogue Retreat surfaced six creative tensions. (See Attachment B.)

In an earlier discussion, we pointed out that when groups face tough issues without a facilitator acting as a Map-less Guide, diverse groups dealing with complex issues often decide to:

1. Table the idea (decide not to deal with it)
2. Decide one side is right (and the other is wrong)

Either direction is a trap. When using Map-less Guiding, a facilitator’s role is to help the group to avoid falling in either of these traps. The Map-less Guide supports the group in taking time to work through tough issues and helps everyone recognize that creative tensions present opportunities for forging new understandings and policies.

**Evolving a greater sense of the ‘whole’**

The dialogue process is an important mechanism for ‘seeding the ground’ by providing a forum for the participants to clarify, articulate and *make the necessary connections* between lived experience and the realities of policy decisions that affect families.

Ellinor and Gerard write about a fostering ‘collective intelligence’ through dialogue. For them this term refers to “gathering the meaning(s) moving among a group of people”. For collective learning to be successful, the group members (individually and collectively) need to move through a process that includes inquiry and reflection in relation to the other dimensions of the issue. In this way, they can begin to see the new connections and collective understandings that are emerging. Different people arrive at this point at different times and in different ways, but there is often a point of collective breakthrough for groups where the ‘whole’ of an issue becomes clear.

The concept of the “net” discussed above is closely linked to another facilitation approach that EPG uses that we call Platforming. This refers to a technique where the facilitator, having listened carefully to the evolving dialogue, asks participants to reflect on the ideas that are emerging. Prompt Questions (“How do these ideas influence one another?”) can help groups achieve this collective breakthrough. In this case, Prompt Questions are designed to help the group move “up a level.” This often involves putting back ‘on the table’ comments and insights from the dialogue so that people can look at them again as a set. After checking in with the group regarding their sense of the accuracy of the set, the facilitator poses a fairly open-ended Prompt Question such as: “Does anybody see any relationship between these ideas?

It requires sensitivity and a sense of timing (and a fairly good memory) on the part of the facilitator to determine what issues and questions are powerful and relevant, and when a group has the potential to reach a new platform. It is an important skill to cultivate for dialogue facilitation. Once seen, the entire group can use the ‘net’ of ideas to ‘climb up’
to this new ‘platform’ of understanding from which they can view the problem or issue from a larger perspective.

**A Holistic Framework for a Family Strengthening Dialogue Process**

To achieve results over the long run, family strengthening conversations must be integrated into a framework that leads to change. TA providers can play an important role in partnering with local leadership to articulate, develop and design a framework that helps them advance a family strengthening agenda. There is no one formula but there are common considerations that will help communities get the best results and maximize the ways that dialogue can contribute to their hopes and dreams for families.

In this section, The Emerging Partnerships Group will present considerations for a Holistic Framework for Facilitated Family Strengthening Dialogue. Within this framework we address several issues TARC had asked EPG to reflect upon in doing the work of this project:

- What are the strategic questions that might help Making Connections sites carry out conversations in family strengthening?
- How might such questions/inquiries be organized in potential tools and frameworks?
What are some ways to get groups to reflect on how to carry out this work in a manner that grows and expands their perspectives on these issues?

TARC had also requested that we offer suggestions regarding the skills that are required to facilitate this work. Our detailed description of the role of facilitation in dialogue, and the tools and techniques for Map-less Guiding address this question to a great extent. However, we thought it would be helpful to point to some additional considerations for Technical Assistance (TA) and facilitation when addressing issues within a Holistic Framework. The section ends by briefly highlighting some suggestions for the TA/Facilitation role.

Illustration 7: A Holistic Approach to Facilitated Dialogue

Family strengthening dialogue is not just about getting groups of people talking. We need to integrate the work in a way that leads to long-term results. As we said in the beginning of this report, dialogue is a complementary tool that can both inform and reinforce other Making Connection site efforts.
Furthermore, what happens *between* dialogues is just as important as what happens *within* dialogues. Our Holistic Approach to Facilitated Dialogue proposes a systems framework to insure that communities get the best results from family strengthening dialogues. A systems approach presumes that all the parts of the system (in this case a system of activities, intentions and interventions towards the goal of family strengthening) are interrelated, interactive, and interdependent. As Daniel Kim points out in his publication *Introduction to Systems Thinking*, the defining characteristics of any system are that:

- They have a purpose, and that living (or natural) systems are continually evolving and have the capacity to alter their purpose.
- All parts must be present for the system to carry out its purpose optimally.
- The order in which the parts are arranged will affect the system’s performance.
- Systems maintain stability through feedback.

This systems framework proposes that we think of family strengthening dialogues not as a linear progression of discrete events that ‘cause’ certain behaviors or outcomes, but as a part of a system of interrelated, interwoven and interactive activities that are geared towards the definable but evolving purpose of building a family strengthening agenda in a neighborhood and/or community. The holistic framework we describe here was developed and refined through the work of the Family Strengthening Dialogue Project. This framework *both* informed the work and was informed by it. It is presented as interrelated features of a systemic approach.

**Your Bounded System: Who – and what – do we want to affect?**

*The first feature of a holistic framework is making choices regarding the scope and focus of your family strengthening dialogue efforts.*

In order to determine how dialogue fits into a larger strategy to strengthen families, it is essential for local leadership, site team leaders and others to figure out whom they are trying to impact.

Every inquiry into the possibility of deepening and widening the conversation about family strengthening starts with a core of motivated people who want to take on the issue in a more methodical way. This ‘core’ group needs to make some decisions about what they think they can affect given their resources and passions. They need to reflect on the ‘boundaries’ of the ‘system’ they are trying to influence. Who do they want to reach out to and why? Who are the stakeholders? What is the scope of this effort, or of this phase of the effort? Are they working to make change in a particular target neighborhood?

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5 The field and different approaches to social systems design is too detailed to go into in this report, however we have attached some references on systems thinking and design considerations in the reference section of this report for those who are interested.
These distinctions are important because they set conceptual boundaries that groups of people agree on. A “bounded system” is essentially the arena that a group believes they can impact. It is built on people’s ‘sense’ of the scale and scope of the system they will work to change as well as hard data. A ‘bounded system’ can be a city block, a neighborhood, a citywide collaborative, or a nation, but a bounded system can also be a family, a group of people, a shared culture, or a collective ‘sense’ of neighborhood boundaries that doesn’t follow census tracks. By designating ‘target neighborhoods’ as arenas to demonstrate the potential impact of the Making Connections effort, the Foundation has engaged in defining system boundaries for a change agenda.

‘Bounding’ a system in this way, does not imply that larger forces do not matter. They do, but bounding the system encourages groups to focus differently on those issues that they can affect and to use feedback to help them understand how they are doing relative to their desired goal. When looking at larger environmental and systems pressures, ‘bounding the system’ helps groups make better decisions about how to leverage, or limit, the impact of larger policies on their ‘bounded system.’ Setting systems boundaries is also a tool for conducting research and development.

Because we were engaged in a small pilot, EPG worked within very defined systems boundaries in our Louisville work. Efforts focused on the UNCAL partnership, the staff of their organizations, and residents from the neighborhoods that they provided services in, as well as clarifying the potential partnership and leadership roles that this group could take on. The purpose was contributing to and promoting a family strengthening agenda in the wider community.

**Getting Clear About What You Want to Create**

*The second feature of a holistic framework is to ‘get out of the box’ and seek an ideal for family strengthening*

Dialogue only works when people care deeply about the issues at hand. There are untold numbers of problems that people could focus on. Dialogue about family strengthening is most productive when it is oriented to a future ideal that everybody can get excited about. People need to identify and name what they want to create. Although we did talk about this issue to some extent, we did not have this specific process-stage built into this pilot. We recommend this for future work, because we are now convinced that more explicit attention to this issue will make a difference.

This visioning stage can be accomplished through facilitated dialogue, but could also entail use of other group techniques such as Appreciative Inquiry, Open Space Technology, or Future Search.

As we know from our own experiences, getting clear about what we want to create is never a one-time effort. As we stated earlier, ‘living’ systems evolve and can alter their purpose in the light of new information and insights. It is important to have an initial
inspiring vision to pull people forward towards an ideal state of affairs. The details of this ideal state -- “what we are trying to create” -- evolve as we learn and as we invite others into the work.

Assessing Where You Are Now

A third feature of a holistic framework is to get a clearer sense of where things ‘are’.

Getting clear where things are involves determining the authentic starting point for the work and the group who will champion and take part in the dialogue process. It is important that people have access to accurate and sufficiently disaggregated data that they can get a clearer picture of the beginning landscape for a family strengthening agenda. It also is helpful for the group to understand and grasp political and institutional realities. What is often overlooked, but also essential, is to understand not only the facts, but also people’s perceptions about them.

This feature of the framework is important because, as we pointed out earlier, most everyone will agree with the notion of strong families. Who wouldn’t? Many decision-making processes, upon discovering this agreement, forge ahead feeling assured that there is sufficient alignment to ‘get the job done’ only to later encounter powerful differences.

In discovering the authentic starting point for the family strengthening conversation, we found it helpful to design an initial line of inquiry that did not presume people had been given much chance to explore what family strengthening was, why it mattered and how they could contribute to it.

Attention needs to be paid to engaging people to help them see and share their own starting points, values, and perspectives about family strengthening. People need to be given the opportunity to describe family and community as they see it. We always used some variation of the basic question: “What do strong families mean to you?” and developed it as a generative theme. With UNCAL, this was accomplished through an initial diagnostic interview with the core team followed by several iterative interviews with others to explore different perspectives. With Residents, we integrated the diagnostic process into the dialogue. Pre-prepared Guiding Questions served as a template for the Resident Dialogues, providing guideposts to help ensure that key issues were raised. An example of Guiding Questions for Resident Dialogues can be found in Attachment D.

As we have discussed, in dialogue, Map-less Guiding requires that the facilitator use questions to provoke and support the flow of conversation and to encourage the surfacing of different perspectives. Perspectives on what constitutes strong families -- and the factors that help or hinder strong families -- are an important initial line of questioning to explore prior to a discussion about family support services and programs. This helps promote a larger exploration of family dynamics, informal support systems, and environmental stressors. The findings from these interviews and dialogues helped us
determine a more authentic starting point for the work, and served as an important initial frame for dialogues and subsequent planning efforts.

Determining how to ‘get there’

A fourth feature of a holistic framework is to take actions that lead to better results and to evolve and support a ‘new conversation’ about children and families that speaks to the future, not the past. It implies building in feedback loops so that we continue to grow and learn.

This is perhaps the trickiest part of the framework for those given to linear analysis because the directionality is somewhat counterintuitive. “Getting there” implies a push – a step-by-step process of moving from the current reality to some future state in which families are strong and supported. A change agenda that transcends current reality implies ‘being pulled forward’ rather than trying to step-by-step ‘climb out’ of current problems. Push strategies can be useful for achieving short term goals, but long lasting transformation requires a pull strategy. Having a clear sense of the purpose and ideal that is being reached for will help the group identify when they have created circumstances that more closely resemble their ideal.

Activities in the ‘pull’ arena involve keeping the agenda moving by articulating, holding onto – and revisiting -- the ideal, remaining strengths-based, and evolving the group’s understanding of its role and purpose. Keep people oriented to the future in order to reinforce a sense of direction and momentum. Participants need to be asked to express their thoughts about the future, both in general terms (where would you like to see this type of dialogue head? What do you see as possible for your community?) and in specific terms (What are the necessary commitments that need to be made so that our system more closely resembles our ideal?).

An essential component of ‘getting there’ using a systemic framework is feedback-learning loops. In systems, causality is an ongoing, interdependent process. Family strengthening dialogues (or any other intervention) can produce anticipated and unanticipated results. The group must develop and agree upon a plan for integrating knowledge and insights from dialogues. This knowledge gained from facilitated dialogue needs to be fed back to participants as well as to leaders so that they can reflect on it and the implications for further actions. Make sure that at the outset people understand that integrating the learnings from dialogue into other site efforts, such as data collection, planning, and implementation takes additional time, but can potentially produce more lasting and meaningful agreements and results.

Tuning in to the environment

A fifth feature of a holistic framework is creating ongoing feedback loops to gauge opportunities and obstacles in the environment.
In addition to building internal feedback loops that insure communication of information and learning within the bounded system, the ongoing work requires that TA providers and others keep questioning what is changing in the larger environment that impacts their efforts to support and promote family strengthening. Both positive and negative forces have an impact on the unfolding of the conversation on family strengthening and what results can emerge from the work. For example, in Louisville, the merging of local government has created a political climate in which the community can come together around an issue because residents have a better opportunity to have the family strengthening message heard.

**Other TA Strategies and Considerations for Getting the Most from Family Strengthening Dialogues**

Within any framework that is adopted, there are a number of considerations that are helpful to TA providers to help get the best results from engaging groups in family strengthening dialogues. The following list outlines strategies for communicating about dialogue, and for the types of TA support that can be employed between dialogues.

**Communicating about dialogue**

- Help sites and site team leaders understand that family strengthening conversations are most effective when they build upon the demand and interest of a committed group of champions.

- Help groups to clarify what dialogue can (and cannot) do to move a family strengthening agenda, and make appropriate decisions about the methodologies they will use based on the specific results they want to achieve at a particular juncture in their work. To aid in this process, we have included a (preliminary cut of a) chart that compares a number different group process methodologies and their applications as Attachment E.

- Suggest that the group use a variety of approaches to identify issues, areas of dissonance and perceptions of family strengthening issues. This can include small group dialogues and dialogue retreats to explore and document different worldviews based on age, class, race, etc., but also may involve one-on-one interviews, data analysis, and other forms of information gathering.

- Help groups understand the 6 dimensions and 3 domains of dialogue, and how dialogue methodology is different from other forms of group deliberation. Ideally, initial dialogue events should be preceded by an interactive session that exposes the group to the basic methodology and assumptions of dialogue.

- Work with groups to devote some thought to the design of the dialogue setting to maximize the effect of dialogue. Most dialogue approaches require that groups meet in a circle without obstruction, and assume that the full group can participate comfortably in dialogue sessions. The CogniScope has additional requirements for
their dialogue approach because of the addition of technology support and the ample use of wall space to display ideas.

- Work with groups to think about how they can create ‘bridges’ to the dialogue experience to make it easier for participants to shift into a dialogue mode. In the Resident Dialogues we took several steps to create such bridges. Prior to the resident dialogues we worked with UNCAL to craft an initial compelling message about the purpose of the dialogue that would be communicated to proposed participants. UNCAL Directors or other senior staff members were on hand to provide background to the group and joined the participants and facilitators in a meal just prior to the dialogue (and in the case of the youth, the meal included their parents if they wished to join). Once the group is together, icebreakers and other opening exercises that attend to the different domains of dialogue can help set a tone for the group. In both the Dialogue Retreat and Dialogue Summit we opened sessions with both prayer and icebreaking exercises.

- Make sure that the group understands that the dialogue process takes time. Getting results from dialogue about complex issues and with diverse groups nearly always requires sustained dialogue. Sustained dialogue gives groups sufficient time for each event, and also brings them together enough times that they can work through the issues.

- Make certain that everyone understands that their dialogue efforts are ultimately geared to an action agenda that builds on the evolved, shared understandings of family strengthening that has emerged through processes among a community of stakeholders.

- Help groups understand how they can use the methodology of dialogue to give voice to those whose contributions are often overlooked or misunderstood in traditional meeting settings.

- Clarify that there are many people who need to be provided additional support to enable them to be part of dialogues. At minimum, make sure that front-line staff and residents do not bear costs in addition to the time they are donating. Advocate for stipends for residents.

- Give people a clear sense of what they can expect in terms of follow-up from each other and from TA.

- Encourage groups to adopt strategies for building local capacity for facilitating and supporting dialogue, and gear your own efforts to support that goal. Identify opportunities to train local residents and others in dialogue techniques and facilitation.

**In between dialogues**
• Identify early champions and build upon the energy and intent of a motivated group of people who will form an ongoing core team.

• Continually work with a core team to expand their connections and understanding of the variety of perspectives that need to be brought to bear. Help sites think through criteria for identifying dialogue participants. Ask the question: “What kinds of knowledge and perspectives need to be brought together at this particular point to move the family strengthening agenda towards the ideal?”

• Provide individual and peer TA and resource support to help groups translate their insights and learnings into action agendas for family strengthening.

• Encourage sites to think through how they can use dialogue to reach out to youth. In addition to conducting dialogue among youth, it is important to find ways to include youth in dialogue and planning efforts with adults. Explain that this may involve doing some things differently, and that youth and adults may need extra support and preparation to effectively work together.

• Look for opportunities to cultivate and support new champions who express the capacity and desire to take on a greater role in promoting a family strengthening agenda.

• Design dialogues that identify and forge connections among various groups. This requires awareness of the specific challenges involved in broadening the impact of dialogue; these challenges include dealing with increased complexity, power dynamics, and addressing ‘import/export dilemmas.’ Depending on where the group’s starting point is, “import/export” strategies for widening dialogue could include: conducting interviews and sharing findings across groups; engaging individuals in inter-group dialogues, recruiting and supporting ‘ambassadors’ to carry messages from one dialogue setting to another, and interweaving dialogues. We have also talked with the UNCAL and CWA Ltd. about using CD ROMs to capture the experience of dialogue to be shared with others.

What are the skills/experiences/capacities that are required to facilitate this work?

We have already addressed issues of dialogue facilitation in great detail, but there are some additional points that can be made regarding the skills/experiences/capacities that are required to facilitate this work.

• TA Providers and site managers should be aware of the variety of dialogue ‘schools’, and recognize that different stages of the work may require different dialogue approaches. Each school has strengths for dealing with different aspects of the family strengthening agenda. Nevertheless, some are more appropriate for dealing with specific challenges than others. For example, the dialogue approaches popularized by MIT’s Dialogue Project are best used with cohesive groups who are
able to engage in a sustained effort to gain insight into each other’s values and the issues. Our approach can do this as well, but incorporates facilitation to deal with the complexity and dynamics of working in a community setting. Structured Dialogue using the CogniScope ™ has been successfully combined with our Map-less Guiding approach to dialogue work with large and diverse groups, and is well suited to groups that have already engaged in dialogue and wish to converge on leverage points for an action agenda.

- Technical Assistance providers need to have a clear sense and commitment to the time it takes to do dialogue (and able to communicate this effectively to others). TA providers must have sufficient time available to engage in the often considerable pre-planning work that leads up to a successful dialogue, and the follow-up work that promotes learning and action.

- Those who provide TA may or not be the same consultants that are equipped to work with groups as facilitators of dialogue. Most often, incorporating dialogue into a family strengthening agenda will require effective teaming of consultants who are willing and able to work within a shared framework.

- Although a number of consultants are well versed in group-facilitation techniques, few have benefited from specific training in facilitating dialogue. Building this skills-base, as well as developing local facilitators to conduct their own dialogues may involve a TARC training investment.

**Final Thoughts**

Facilitated Dialogue offers a new way to forge agreement and joint understanding among disparate people in communities about the issue of family strengthening. Dialogue is a powerful strategy for engaging residents and can contribute to community organizing efforts at a very fundamental level. Dialogue promotes the creation of new and committed champions. It gathers larger groups of people at a new level of collective understanding that will lead to sounder and more supported policies and decisions. Dialogue can also form bridges of understanding between different stakeholders and promote lasting agreements. The agreements that are reached through dialogue represent a convergence of ideas based not on a single ‘silver bullet’ solution but on a shared breakthrough in understanding of what family strengthening means in the context of a particular community. Dialogue done right leads groups to more powerful commitments and longer-lasting results.

The Emerging Partnerships Group’s Holistic Approach to Facilitated Dialogue represents a pathway to change that can be helpful to Technical Assistance Providers, facilitators and local leadership in designing and carrying out future Family Strengthening efforts.

An understanding of the meaning and practical importance of Family Strengthening in neighborhood contexts is an essential feature of the Making Connections effort. In the
Louisville pilot program, we have shown that facilitated dialogue carried out within a framework that translates dialogue into results can contribute significantly to future Making Connections projects.
V. References and Selected Readings

On Dialogue and Related Group Work


Simmons, Annette, *A Safe Place for Dangerous Truths: Using Dialogue to Overcome Fear and Distrust at Work*, Annette Simmons, 1999


On Systems Theory and Systems Design


VI. Attachments

Attachment A: Staff/Board Interviews and Resident Dialogue Themes

Louisville, KY

8/17/00

Background

The following themes were compiled to assist in the planning and design of a September 2000 UNCAL (a partnership among five settlement houses) Dialogue Retreat to engage a group of individuals associated with five Louisville settlement houses in a dialogue on Family Strengthening in Louisville neighborhoods. Directors, staff and board members engaged in a dialogue to help them galvanize their thinking about family strengthening and how it translates into action internally (within their own organizations) and collaboratively (among themselves, and in partnership with others).

The idea for engaging in a series of family strengthening dialogues came about as a result of several conversations between UNCAL and Sammy Moon, site director for the Annie E. Casey Foundation Making Connections Initiative in Louisville. UNCAL expressed a desire to engage in a deeper exploration of family strengthening efforts in their community, and were compelled by the idea of organizing dialogues to that end. The foundation agreed to work with UNCAL and provided the services of Elena Pell through the Family Strengthening Dialogue Project. The site team leader also arranged to have Debbie Chase, a Making Connections consultant based in St. Louis, partner with Elena Pell.

In the initial months, a core team (comprised of the UNCAL Directors, the site team leader, a TARC representative and the two consultants) the UNCAL worked together to arrive at a framework for the first family strengthening dialogues in Louisville.

Building upon findings from resident dialogues and interviews with selected staff and board members, the group set out to design a 1 ½ day staff/board retreat held September 2000. The group identified the following goals for the first UNCAL Family Strengthening dialogue:

- Clarify values and language around family strengthening and deepen thinking around family strengthening practice
- Identify areas where family strengthening values and principles break down in operations
- Arrive at an agreed upon process for continuing to build capacity for family strengthening efforts, and for bringing other relevant voices and perspectives (including those of families) to bear in planning and implementation
• Identify areas for follow-up and clarify where the settlement houses might benefit from outside technical assistance from consultants and/or peers to strengthen their work with families and around family strengthening.

• Develop a clearer sense of how the settlement houses make the case for family strengthening principles to various external and internal audiences.

In preparation for this event, it was agreed that the consultants would interview up to ten anticipated retreat participants from the staff and boards of the settlement houses in order to identify some key issues and themes that might be attended to at the retreat.

The UNCAL committee also expressed interest in bringing family/neighborhood residents into the family strengthening efforts that they are undertaking, but were not yet in agreement as to the appropriate time, forum and specific format for bringing residents into the actual dialogue/planning process. The planning group arrived at a decision to conduct Resident Dialogues in the community to:

• gain a better sense of the community and issues related to family strengthening from the resident’s perspective
• gather information and insights into how the Settlement Houses might respond more effectively to families needs
• begin to build capacity for family members to play a more central role in the planning and design of family strengthening efforts, and to gain insight into the processes that might facilitate this goal
• inform the decisionmaking process of the settlement house directors and/or the retreat participants about how to work with families in their ongoing planning, design and advocacy efforts.

Elena Pell and Debbie Chase traveled to Louisville in July 2000 to conduct four Resident Dialogues. 30 individuals (18 youth and young adults, and 12 adults) were consulted over the course of two days. The UNCAL Directors recruited dialogue participants, arranged for the venue, and were on hand to participate in pre-meeting meals and to introduce Elena and Debbie, who facilitated and recorded the dialogues. The dialogues were organized around a prepared set of “Guiding Questions” that would be posed to the group in the course of the conversation. The Guiding Questions were prepared with input from the directors, and one director served as an additional resource person to advise the consultants on issues of language, tone and context that needed to be taken into account during the dialogue.

After the dialogues, the consultants met with the core team twice by phone to discuss their notes, and prepared a preliminary set of themes that draw from both the interviews and Resident Dialogues. The following themes were presented to the UNCAL directors and selected staff at a meeting in Louisville held August 2000. The goal of this meeting was to frame the content of the first Family Strengthening Dialogue Retreat, and to develop a communication/feedback plan to discuss and analyze findings directly with residents who participated in the dialogues.
Summary of Findings

1) *The primacy of the family.* The absolute central role that strong families play in building and sustaining neighborhood environments came across as one of the strongest themes. Most everyone that participated in the dialogues regards the family as critical for sustaining neighborhoods as well as raising children.

2) *The power of family bonds.* Staff and board members have a great deal of faith in the inherent strength of Louisville’s families and in their ability to overcome obstacles with reasonable support systems. The residents (both youth and adults) tend to regard the family as critical regardless of the composition and makeup of the family. Both staff and residents spoke of the tremendous strength of single parents. Many people in the resident groups cited the power of family bonds -- and love within families -- as the biggest factors in families getting through tough situations.

3) *Families are under tremendous stress.* Everyone agrees that the families that are living in the neighborhoods served by the five settlement houses are under a great deal of stress. Major sources of stress on families described were:

   - Isolation and lack of communication.
   - Racial segregation and discrimination
   - Poor neighborhood infrastructure (lack of public space, inadequate housing, businesses, recreational facilitates, transportation, and the predominance of liquor stores).
   - Economic pressures especially the difficult and conflicting requirements of work and family for working parents. The notion that economic pressures keep families from spending as much time as they would like together was voiced by adults, youth, and staff. Several adult residents felt employers need to be reached about the need for flexibility so those parents can be with children for important events.
   - Youth commented on a lack of role models and mentors in the community for youth. Some adults also voiced this concern. Youth want credible people to talk with, those who have faced the problems they face. It should be noted that several of the adults and older youth that participated in the dialogues could potentially provide exposure to many different career paths and could serve as strong mentors and role models to youth.
   - The volatility of the community’s relationship with the police. Residents felt that there was a lack of training of police to handle the difficult situations that they encounter. They perceive that police are not fully engaged in protecting them and shared several vivid stories of race-based discrimination in the handling of police situations that they were directly involved in.
   - One adult group expressed a more positive view of neighborhood support than the other did. One factor that could explain this difference is that parents of young children (much more prevalent in the second adult group) had more stresses as to the management of their lives.

4) *The task of holding together families is increasingly falling on the ‘strongest’ or most connected, family members.* Many residents, particularly youth, described how
selected members of their family, often only a single individual, formed the bedrock of their strength. The trust they felt in this individual was crucial to their sense of safety and connection. It mattered less that it was a ‘perfect relationship’ than the sense that they could count on someone associated with their family no matter what.

5) In nearly every family situation, there are family members for whom the bond has been severely fractured. The youth talked a great deal about severely disrupted families, and how their families don’t get together as such anymore. They explained that family conflict is the main reason for why they do not get together as a family for reunions and family gatherings. A number of them said that there is always at least one person in the family who has “poor self esteem” (their words) and can’t be counted on. The manifestation of this is family members on drugs, in jail, acting out violently, etc.

6) Some youth feel they have no one in their family they can reliably turn to. There were a couple youth that felt there was no one in their families that they could count on, and the youth felt that there were numerous young people in their neighborhoods who were in this situation. Indeed, they described the attraction of some youth to gangs as “looking for love” as well as responding to peer pressure. Interestingly, they also felt that the reason that gang culture hadn’t taken a deeper hold in Louisville was because the familial and other connections between youth in their community are still too strong to be in congruence with the requirements of gang activity. These youth often turn to what one youth called their “community family” which consists of neighbors and agency staff that they rely on.

7) The powerful role of faith and spirituality. The role of faith and spirituality in building and sustaining strong families and neighborhoods is a strong and recurring theme with both youth and adults. For these community residents, they often talk about the role of faith and spirituality in their own personal salvation and survival under difficult circumstances. Their faith helps them deal with difficult challenges in their daily lives. They also emphasize that their being able to meet those challenges with the help of their faith strengthens their fortitude. In the words of one adult resident: “religion is part of our strength, and reality is part of our strength.” A few of them point to settlement house staff as having played key roles in connecting them to their faith, and some spoke of individuals in the religious community (often relatives or family friends) that play a key role in their lives and spirituality. Notably absent among the residents was any sense of faith institutions being part of the picture around family strengthening. They had little say about the role of churches, and as one youth stated: the “the churches are competing with one another, not helping the community”. Settlement house staff and board members also point to how spirituality and faith are central to the work of the settlement houses as well in the lives of the residents, but express more confidence in the role of churches in meeting community needs.

8) Deep connections to community. The people who work and live in Louisville have a deep and abiding sense of place. Most families are multi-generational in Louisville,
and many staff have roots in the community as well. There is tremendous pride in the Louisville community as a whole and strong identification with their neighborhoods. Yet, in spite of the ‘small town’ pride that people feel about Louisville, there is little connection between the residents in the different settlement house neighborhoods, particularly those where the race makeup is very different. The youth often spend time in more than one neighborhood, while parents and staff seemed to stay within the areas that they live or work. Youth decried the lack of organized recreation activities, especially at night, and attributed a lot of their migration into other neighborhoods as an attempt to find other youth on the street, seek entertainment, or to be with family members located in other neighborhoods. Often, youth described going to neighborhoods that are more distressed than the one in which they live. Both adult and youth residents would like to see the settlement houses play a greater role in getting the different communities together.

9) There is discordance between settlement house staff and board members and community residents as to the relative importance of formal and informal supports for strengthening families. Several staff and board members see the programs and services offered at the settlement houses as essential to building strong families. A few staff members see building internal strength among residents was the most important element of building a strong family. However, there is some discordance between staff and residents views on this issue. Many staff place a great deal of importance on the role of programs building strong families through their work. Residents also pointed to the central role that the settlement houses and their programs play in their lives, and in helping them to manage complex circumstances, and value the programs tremendously, but feel they are the ones to build and sustain families and communities. Residents put a great deal more emphasis than the staff on other factors that contribute to helping their families stay strong, such as informal support networks, that although are very fragile, still exist for them. Adult focus group members spoke of the tremendous value they placed on families looking out for each other. Adults gave examples of how they had had neighbors check in on their houses, and still had neighbors who had keys to their homes for use in emergencies. They think these connections are critical, and mourn the extent to which they have been broken in their communities. Residents felt that the creation of places and avenues for people to gather and organize both socially and politically would be very valuable in helping to recreate some of these connections, and some felt that this was something that the settlement houses could help promote through joint activities and programs.

10) Youth are living with chaos. The youth, much more than adults, could describe, often in great detail, the activities of drug dealers, gangs, and violent incidents that had taken place in the communities. As one youth said, “the neighborhood is crazy.” Issues of safety are extremely powerful for them, and need to be taken into consideration throughout the day, and in nearly every situation they encounter ‘on the street’ and sometimes, in their homes. For instance, they described casual recreation that is not organized through the settlement house or some other agency as
downright perilous. The cost of offending someone on a basketball court, for instance, was so great that many chose not to participate. Other issues of safety have grown from their experiences, one very recent, of having lost friends and family members in drive-by shootings. One young girl described how she moved her bed away from her window because she became scared of being inadvertently shot. One young child spoke of the sexualization of girls being a big issue for her (to the nodding of several older girls). Because of their safety concerns, the youth advocated for the availability of transportation to and from evening activities. They described many other youths “whose parents don’t care for them” and who “let their children disrespect them.” They attribute a lot of parenting problems to crack and multigenerational behaviors that they see as entrenched. They believe that they are stronger than “average kids” because of what they have been through.

11) There is both talent and hope among youth but many of them are unsure about their futures. This particular group of young people is, for the large part, very hopeful about their futures. Most of them felt that there was some type of path in life for themselves, and described potential careers that they wanted to engage in. They felt they were the exception in their neighborhoods. A few qualified their hopes and dreams for the future with the possibility that they may not make it, and may lose their lives at a young age. As one youth stated, “I don’t worry about this (drugs, gangs, gambling, etc.) though, when it’s my time, it’s my time. I don’t run.”

12) Young people are concerned about the number of kids they see falling through the cracks. Youth felt that “average” or “below average” kids at the Settlement Houses are not being helped, and that the focus tends to be on the “good” or “bright” kids. Residents want a way to engage troubled kids and kids who are too poor to think they can come to the Houses. Also, they spoke of youth slightly above the income eligibility levels get left out with no where to go.

13) Resident involvement in shaping the institutions that affect them is minimal. Both the youth and adult groups commented that they do not have any avenues to influencing the institutions that affect their lives. They are generally (with only two exceptions) not involved in planning, policy, and/or advocacy efforts in their community, with the schools, or with the settlement houses. This is particularly notable because this group represents those individuals who likely have the closest ties to the settlement houses through participation in their programs. Both adults and youth expressed a strong desire to become more involved in the transformation of their communities. One adult male stated: “I can think of three men I could call tomorrow to help us get things started.”

14) The importance of partnership is endorsed in principal, but people have not had an opportunity to think through how (and with whom) to enter into partnership. Everyone felt that partnership is critical for tackling issues related to family strengthening. There is a need and a desire for partnership with community organizations, with residents and with other settlement houses. The settlement house board members we spoke to mentioned the importance of partnering with the
community. Notions about what constituted an effective partnership, which should
partner with whom, and the timing and sequencing of partnership relationships
varied tremendously. Youth also expressed a desire to be more involved in helping
their communities and in planning recreational programs.

15) The demands of front-line staffing. The demands of front-line staff at the settlement
houses are considerable. One person described it as a ‘hellish job.’ Of particular
concern are the conflicting demands of good outreach and good management. Often
it is difficult to find someone who can do both well. Youth talked about the need for
counselors who could get out into the homes more often, but there is clearly a
tension between the large demands of front-line work and the need for deeper and
broader outreach into the community.
**Attachment B: Creative Tensions Identified in the Course of the UNCAL Dialogue Retreat**

How strengths within families are viewed. Dissonance still exists between resident and ‘providers’ perceptions.

Family leadership, and when or whether families are solution or the problem. Leading the family unit and leading the family into the community differences. Residents have different point of view about the role of family leadership as well as the abilities of families to lead.

Partnerships with others. What does this mean in reality? Implications? To what extent can we do this and how will this play out?

Resident input/families knowing what they need. How can we get real input? During the resident dialogues, residents expressed willingness and capacity to articulate their needs and strengths in great detail, yet a number of participants in the retreat raised concerns about the ability of residents to assess their needs. Do we really believe that families know what they need? What are the implications for trying to work through a family strengthening lens if we don’t?

What constitutes support? Residents have different views of how they are best supported. Although they acknowledge (and express gratitude for the program supports they receive), they place a lot more emphasis on familial/neighborhood support systems than the retreat participants do. In fact, residents seem to long for a world where they don’t need so much support from providers.

Staffing issues. Family strengthening issues sometimes look different from the front line because they are dealing with a different set of realities than leadership. Also, the goals of improving the work around family strengthening, and the realities of staff capacity often get in the way of one another.
**Attachment C: The CogniScope™ Dialogue Methodology**

The CogniScope™ offers a powerful methodology for helping deal with the dilemmas often faced in dialogue events. It’s facilitation norms and tools go to great lengths to protect the autonomy and authenticity of the least powerful members of the group, thus balancing and clarifying the contributions of all stakeholders. Technology support allows for a thorough and pictorial record of people’s contributions to the dialogue to unfold in the course of the dialogue event, thus contributing to individual and collective learning, integration of the diversity of viewpoints, the discernment of salient priorities for design, and the emergence and codification of a situation-specific consensual linguistic domain that enables understanding and meaningful action.

The Architecture the CogniScope™ system is composed of 35 constructs, consisting of seven modules.

1) **The Five “Cs” of the CogniScope system**  
   a) Community of Stakeholders  
   b) CogniScope Team  
   c) Consensus Methods  
   d) Cognisystem software  
   e) Collaborative facility

2) **Seven Consensus Methods that they employ**  
   a. Nominal Group Technique (NGT)  
   b. ISM  
   c. Ideawriting  
   d. DELPHI technique  
   e. Options Field  
   f. Options Profile  
   g. Trade-off Analysis;

3) **Three Key Role Distinctions**  
   a) Context  
   b) Content  
   c) Process

4) **Three Application Phases**  
   a) Discovery  
   b) Dialogue  
   c) Arena Action

5) **Four Dialogue Stage**  
   a) Definition/Anticipation  
   b) Design  
   c) Choice  
   d) Action Planning.
6) **Six Dialogue Principles**
   a) Variety (Ashby)
   b) Parsimony (Miller)
   c) Saliency (Boulding)
   d) Meaning (Pierce)
   e) Autonomy (Tsivacou)
   f) Learning (Dye).

7) **Seven Linguistic Patterns**
   a) The Elementary Observation
   b) The Problematique
   c) The Tree Structure
   d) The Options Field
   e) The Options Profile
   f) The Superposition Structure
   g) The Action Plan

For more information about the CogniScope™, please visit the CWA, Ltd. website:
www.CWALtd.com
Attachment D: Sample Guiding Questions for Resident Dialogues

Average Dialogue Session Duration 1.5 – 2 hours

This set of Guiding Questions is not a strict protocol, but a set of guideposts for a facilitated generative dialogue using a Map-less Guiding approach. It is important to be flexible and intuitive in the questioning, and to create an atmosphere of open exchange of ideas and perspectives. We allowed for a relaxed conversation flow (including silences) and posed prompting and probing questions to help the group delve deeper into the meaning of their remarks, and identify connections among people’s perspectives and experiences.

Tell the group who you are and why you are there. Share something about yourself and what motivates you to do this type of work.

Introductions/icebreaker – Name and neighborhood, plus any other item that seems appropriate for this group. The Louisville dialogues followed a dinner gathering. More of an icebreaker may be needed if this is the first time this group has sat together.

Questions:

1. Tell us about your neighborhood (s). Who lives there? What do you like/dislike about living in your neighborhood (s)?
2. What do you think makes a strong family? What are some of the strengths you see in your own family?
3. What are some of the things that support families’ abilities to become and stay strong?
4. What are some factors that make it difficult for families to be strong and care for their children? What would make it easier for your family?
5. How connected to you feel to your community? How has that changed? How would you like it to be?
6. What is it like to try to access services in your neighborhood (eg: health care, day care, etc.)? Who is most helpful to you and why?
7. Have you ever had the experience of partnering/volunteering to work with others on behalf of your neighborhood or community? What was that like? What would make it easier to be involved in this way?
8. Open dialogue: final thoughts/comments.
9. Clarify next steps. Expressions of gratitude and openness to feedback.

Notes on dialogue with youth:

Questions need to be modified slightly for the youth-only dialogue. We found these additional lines of inquiry useful to explore with youth:

- What do you see for yourselves in the future?
- What makes you feel like you belong?
Attachment E: Group Process Methodologies

(See attached file)