

The First 2000 Days: The power of conversation!

The work to date of EC Mapping and the First 2000 days initiative have reinforced that moving the needle on early childhood development will require collective action within and among coalitions. Tackling this challenge can feel overwhelming for those coalitions in the process of figuring out where to begin. Could bringing people together in conversation offer a logical starting point and foundation for the future efforts required to make a difference? Might purposefully engaging parents, coalition members and coalition groups in dialogue be the catalyst for identifying shared interests, highlighting possible solutions and generating the energy needed for taking the steps required to positively impact early childhood development?

As people of action we are often motivated to just roll up our sleeves and get to work. With so many things to attend to, it can be challenging for a newly formed coalition to take the time to host and generate conversations. Sometimes it can feel more efficient for the organizing members of the coalition to launch right into action. However, the process of engaging the greater community offers a unique opportunity to highlight local assets, to consider the issues from a broader perspective and identify locally relevant potential action steps. Adopting a strength-based, appreciative orientation to these conversations serves to set the tone for a process that focuses on possibilities rather than problems, a citizen versus a client approach, and one where relationships are at the centre of the community efforts. These elements of successful community building are integral to an *asset-based community development approach* (McKnight and Kretzmann, 2003)

When citizens have the opportunity to come together to share their dreams and experiences it can result in collective energy for bringing about change. Paul Born, president of the Tamarack Institute and author of *Community Conversations*, maintains that community conversations are increasingly at the heart of engagement across sectors and vital to bringing about relevant and sustainable social change. He sees the potential of conversations to create a space of trust where communities can learn together and form a common vision. In bringing together the people that can help make things happen, a community can be well on its way to finding ways to effectively work together around shared interests.

Coalitions have a unique opportunity to provide the space for parents and community members to discuss questions such as: *What are your hopes and dreams for your children? How have you been successful in supporting healthy early childhood development (ECD) at home or in your work? What are the possibilities for supporting positive ECD that would make a big difference in this community?* This type of dialogue can serve to validate the experiences of parents and community members to date and acknowledge the commitment they are showing to support healthy development. In doing so, community members may gain ownership and participate more fully as coalition members, and see the potential in taking collective action. Sharing of experience tends to highlight the inherent local strengths and assets that the coalition can draw upon, and creates an opportunity to build relationships, community connections and support networks. Research and experience have taught us that building relationships within and among systems of support are at the heart of healthy children and communities. (i.e. Search Institute, social capital theory, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory).

Providing a space for conversation and relationship building within and between coalitions is foundational for maximizing our collective capacity and realizing the vision of the First 2000 Days Network. Bringing citizens, coalitions and local institutions together to talk about the importance of the early years and dream about how we can work to positively impact early childhood development is so much more than “just conversation”! These community conversations can inform us, inspire us and spur us into action in pursuit of our vision, that all children, supported by family and community will reach their optimal development.

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References and further reading:

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