

Three Strategies for Family Engagement



Empathy Interviews
Listening Sessions
Feedback Partners

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Introduction

Welcome to the family engagement guide for **Accelerate ED** teams. Your commitment to expanding the role that youth and families play in the design and scale of programs is inspiring. We designed this resource to illustrate three ways you might continue to expand how you engage families as you build, implement, and scale your Accelerate ED vision. We can't wait to hear your success stories!



The first important step for anyone looking for family engagement strategies is to reflect on your **why**. So, before you jump into **how** to engage families, we ask you to pause and reflect on the following questions.

- What is the goal of your project?
- What are your hopes and dreams if this project is wildly successful?
- How will engaging families support these goals, hopes, and dreams?
- In what ways will family engagement impact this project?

Now that you've had a chance to reflect on your why, let's journey into mindsets¹ that cut across the different ways we might engage with families. We humbly ask you to hold these mindsets throughout your time in this guide.



Seek Liberatory Collaboration

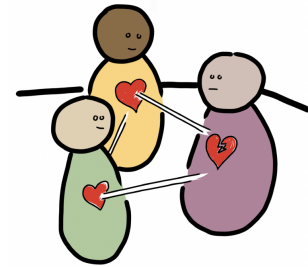
Seek liberatory collaboration asks us to reimagine the design process itself. Instead of reifying the conventional hierarchy of designing **for** communities, liberatory collaboration is designing **in partnership with** communities. This shift reorients power and creates the conditions for more just and equitable solutions. A few ways to work towards **liberatory collaboration**:

- Actively seek diverse identities, roles, and skill sets in building a design team.
- Acknowledge and build from the strengths, stories, and skills of team members.
- Define specific conditions for collective learning, risk-taking, and action.
- When framing the question, “How Might We...?” it is important to ensure that the “we” is diverse and inclusive.

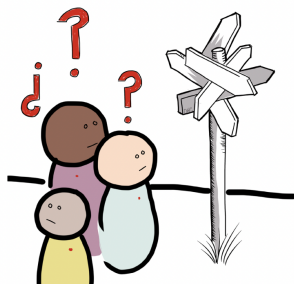
¹ Mindsets are adapted from Liberatory Design Deck: Liberatory Design is the result of a collaboration between Tania Anaisie, David Clifford, Susie Wise, and the National Equity Project [Victor Cary and Tom Malarkey]. Resources are at www.liberatorydesign.com.

Building relational trust is the glue for improving systems through design. This is especially important when working through difficult problems with communities marginalized by current systems. Investing in deep relational work creates authentic and meaningful connections that engender trust and healing. Here are a few ways to work towards **building relational trust**:

- Facilitate personal connection by inviting people to share what matters to them.
- Dedicate time and space for people to bring forward their full selves and identities.
- Create space for community to reflect, express, and process thoughts and emotions.
- Cultivate a culture that invites dialogue and collective sense-making.



Build Relational Trust



Embrace Complexity

Embrace complexity leans into the messiness of this work as a strength. Instead of shying away from complexity, liberatory design **seeks** complexity as a way of understanding the problem and finding better solutions. [Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie](#) speaks to the danger of a single story and by way of multiple stories, perspectives, and ideas, a more authentic and legitimate picture begins to emerge. Following are a few ways to work towards **embracing complexity**:

- Acknowledge the confusion and discomfort caused by the uncertainty present in our work.
- Bring together multiple perspectives on the challenge to open up ways of thinking, especially from those most harmed by current systems.
- Create opportunities for sense-making before decision-making.

With both the **why** and **mindsets** present we can now venture into the **how** of family engagement.

Three Strategies of Family Engagement

There are many ways to engage with families, and depending on purpose, capacity, and intended impact, some ways might be more suitable than others. While there are many methods for engaging families, this guide includes three methods that are accessible, meaningful, and support efforts to improve systems:

Empathy interviews are semi-structured interviews that utilize open-ended prompts and probing questions to elicit stories of participants' experiences within systems. As an interviewer, your goal is to follow the participants' stories—not try to direct them with leading questions. In essence, you create the conditions to really hear the stories of people navigating your system.

Listening sessions are a type of facilitated discussion with a group of people, aimed at collecting information about their experiences in the system. The sessions use a variety of activities and strategies to collect input and ideas.

Feedback partners are family members who provide perspectives, feedback, and ideas through ongoing involvement with design teams. This might include feedback on team priorities, root causes of a problem, and change ideas.

Which strategy is right for you? First, consider the types of family involvement you are looking for:

Empathize. *Try to deeply understand the experiences, perspectives, and feelings of families and apply what you learn.*

Involve. *Engage families in events and processes with the design team to share their unique needs, priorities, and perspectives.*

Share decision-making. *Family members play a leadership role in decision-making and have some decision-making power.*

The strategies of **empathy interviews** and **listening sessions** are almost always methods to **empathize** with others. That is, to try and understand experiences and perspectives and apply what you learn. These are great strategies when you are trying to:

- Identify or prioritize a problem you want to solve
- Understand or prioritize the root causes of a problem
- Uncover specific needs that will inform system redesign

Feedback partners offer a method to both empathize with and **involve** families. This method involves a deeper and ongoing commitment to participants as trusted advisors. Feedback partners may or may not be directly involved in decision-making, but their input can help craft the vision, direction, and implementation of improvement efforts. This is a great strategy when you are trying to:

- Address any of the bullets mentioned above for empathy interviews and listening sessions
- Incorporate feedback on proposed change ideas to improve systems
- Reflect on the impact of changes to the system

If your goal is to **share decision-making** with families, it is likely you need to move further than the three strategies in this guide and involve families directly on your design team. As Dr. Brandi Hinnant-Crawford offers, “User-centered doesn’t mean just interviewing these folks but also means these folks are a part, and not just the part where they sit at the table. They have **agency** and **power** and **voice** in everything we do from what types of data we look at to what decisions we make after we look at that data.”

Does some of this sound familiar? The three types of engagement were introduced in the August 2022 Accelerate ED webinar: [Framework of Possibilities for Student Involvement](#).

Caution: In any of these types of engagement, we risk sliding into tokenizing families. This happens when we are unclear about the role, intention, and next steps of family engagement. We can do harm when we are not transparent about the type of engagement and mislead families about how their participation fits into the larger scope of work. For example, a family may assume their input will directly shape the implementation of the project, when instead they’re involved in empathy interviews focused on better understanding the problem of practice. The empathy interview **will** help the project, but if it is not the direct involvement that the family assumes, this could lead to mistrust and disengagement in the future.

Part of transparency is also a commitment to circle back to families no matter the type of engagement. In order to mitigate harm we need to reduce the extractive nature of family engagement (families give and we take without reciprocity), so we go back to families with updates on **how** their involvement has impacted the project. What this sounds, looks, and feels like can vary depending on the project but the essential part is that we **re-engage** families as part of this process. As you can imagine, the impact of re-engagement is incredibly powerful for families.

The next section of the guide provides some guidelines and practical tips for outreach and recruitment for any of the three strategies. The rest of the guide is divided into three sections: empathy interviews, listening sessions, and feedback partners. Each section includes where to start, important ideas to consider, as well as practical next steps to initiate family engagement in your context.

APPENDIX - EXAMPLE

Sample Listening Session #1 8-12 family members of current high school seniors Purpose: Explore strengths and needs of recruitment and enrollment systems		
Minutes	What	Details
5	Welcome and Overview	Explain the purpose of the listening session: <i>Welcome to each of you. Thank you so very much for taking time out of your day to attend this listening session. My name is _____ and I'm a [teacher/student] at _____ school. I'm here with my colleagues from _____ [others introduce themselves]. We're here today because our _____ group of educators/leaders/etc. are trying to more deeply understand and enhance _____ in our schools/colleges/etc. We can only do that by listening and learning from each other. Last month we conducted in-depth interviews with each other about the same topics we're exploring with you today. The things you share from these listening sessions will be used in our _____.</i> We'll be looking at feedback across all of the listening sessions and interviews in order to identify what students need and then design some ideas to meet those needs. We have a note taker here today but she/he is not using your names in the notes. We just need an accurate record of the stories you share with us. I invite you to review the agreements we have set for today and see if you have any suggestions or modifications.
8	Participant Introductions	Let's take a minute for everyone to introduce themselves. Please share: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Your name ● How long you've lived in this community ● What are your connections to _____? I'll go first to model. Go around the room for all answers.
5	Agreements	On the wall you see the agreements we suggest for this space. I'll read them now and then open it up to your suggestions if there are other agreements you'd like to add. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Listen from a place of love. No judgment. ● Answering is always optional. ● Confidentiality. Please don't share the information from this listening session with others. ● Share the space. We want to hear from everyone. ● Disagreement is okay. If you have a different experience or perspective, please share. ● Take care of your needs.
10	Question 1	We are going to go around the room and share some information about how your student participates in _____ program. But remember that you can always pass. How long has your student been participating? Share something that has impressed you or made you proud of your student.
12	Question 2a	For this activity, we have __#__ of posters on the wall with a statement and a continuum under the statement. Using your marker, could you please go to each poster and put an X where your perspective falls on the line? I encourage you to stop for more snacks on your way back to your seat. (Take a few minutes to do all the posters.)

		<p>A poster might have statements like:</p> <p><i>It was easy for my student to enroll in the ___ program.</i> <i>My student needed my help to apply for the ___ program.</i> <i>As a family member, I know everything I need to know about the ___ program.</i> <i>Communication from the ___ program is really good.</i></p> <p>Underneath each statement is a scale: Strongly disagree -----Strongly agree</p> <p>Once people are done: Let's talk about what we see on the first poster. Does anyone want to share where they put their answer and why?</p> <p><i>Ask probing questions as appropriate.</i></p>
8	Question 2b	<p>Let's talk about what we see on the second poster. Does anyone want to share where they put their answer and why?</p> <p><i>Ask probing questions as appropriate.</i></p>
8	Question 2c	<p>Let's talk about what we see on the third poster. Does anyone want to share where they put their answer and why?</p> <p><i>Ask probing questions as appropriate.</i></p>
5	Question 2d	<p>We just talked about a lot of things. I'd like to open up the space for a few minutes if there are other things on your mind related to what we just talked about. Does anyone have anything else they'd like to share?</p>
15	Question 3	<p>Now I'm going to open up and ask questions that reach beyond this program.</p> <p>Questions such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Who is someone (in your school or community) you trust to provide information that is accurate and understandable? ● What is an example of something you received as a family member (from the school or community) that was clear and easy to understand? ● What is an example of something you received as a family member (from the school or community) that wasn't clear and easy to understand? ● Etc.
	If time remains	<p>Ask for any follow-up thoughts on anything that has been shared today.</p>
5	Closing	<p>Ask everyone to share an appreciation for something they heard or learned.</p> <p>Share what will happen next with the information collected from this listening session.</p>