FISHBOWL FORUMS

A Guide to developing effective dialogue meetings

Developed and carried out in West Hartford by Healthy Community / Healthy Children – a community based asset building initiative

This project is supported by the Connecticut Assets Network in collaboration with Healthy Community / Healthy Children of West Hartford, CT.

www.ctassets.org
This Booklet is dedicated to the following:

• To all present and past Healthy Community / Healthy Children members, especially Sarah Perry and Cross Woodfield, student co-chairs, for their hard work and dedication in making West Hartford, Connecticut a healthier community for all.

• To the students and administrators of Kingswood – Oxford School, West Hartford, for introducing the concept of Fishbowl Forums to Healthy Community / Healthy Children.

• Lastly, to the Connecticut Assets Network for believing in our vision of making West Hartford a better place to live for young and old alike. With your support the possibilities are endless!
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Listen

When you listen you affirm me, but your listening must be real, sensitive and serious, not looking busily around, not with a worried or distracted frown, not preparing what you will say next, but giving me your full attention. You are telling that I am a person of value, important and worth listening to one with whom you will share yourself.

I have ideas to share, feeling which too often I keep to myself, deep questions which struggle inside me for answers. I have hope only tentatively acknowledged which are not easy to share, and pain and guilt and fear I try to stifle. These are sensitive areas and a real part of me, but it takes courage to confide in another.

I need to listen too if we are to become close. How can I tell you I understand? I can show interest with my eyes or an occasional word, attuned to pick up not only the spoken words, but also the glimmer of a smile, a look of pain, the hesitation, the struggle which may suggest something as yet too deep for words.

So let us take time together, respecting the other’s freedom, encouraging without hurrying, understanding that some things may never be brought to light, but others may emerge given time. Each, through this listening, enriches the other with the priceless gift of intimacy.

Keith Pearsch
Melbourne, Australia
**INTRODUCTION**

A Fishbowl Forum is designed to get us to LISTEN to each other about some more controversial issues. It is not an opportunity for us to problem solve, talk directly to each other, or challenge each other. It is an opportunity for us to HEAR each other, to listen carefully, and to engage in respectful dialogue. A chance for us to get to know where each other is coming from, what we each believe, and how our views affect each other. Furthermore, a Fishbowl provides a structured approach to questions and answers. Communication skills, empowerment, and social competence are also strengthened when this technique is implemented honestly.

**What is the Healthy Community / Healthy Children Initiative in West Hartford?** — A grassroots initiative to define and enhance a “healthy community”- its assets, strengths, and resources, as well as its challenges. The group is a growing and diverse group of teens, parents, and other adults who are developing new ways to address the complex challenges facing youth and families today. HC / HC advocates for both new and existing programs which provide opportunities for healthy relationships between adults and youths, alter the environment in which youth make social decisions, bring youths and families together to enjoy “community building”, food, and fun, and foster cross-cultural and cross-town understanding.

**What is the Connecticut Assets Network?** — A private, nonprofit organization that promotes the use of asset-based strategies for the healthy development of youth, families, and communities. This approach recognizes people of all ages as **problem solvers rather than problems to be solved**. The Network sponsors multiple events for participating individuals and communities in Connecticut to interact around this concept. Included in the network are six partnership initiatives, like HC / HC, around the state, a newsletter, web site, and ongoing learning communities. Environments and local communities in which citizen development and contribution are practiced, are the foundation for **sustained solutions to problems** and as such are widely recognized as a key to developing healthier communities.

*We do not believe in ourselves until someone reveals that deep inside us something is valuable, worth listening to, worthy of our touch, sacred to our touch. Once we believe in ourselves, we can risk curiosity, wonder, spontaneous delight, or any experience which reveals the human spirit.*

--E.E. Cummings
“Developmental Assets and Resiliency Theory”

Editor’s Note: This excerpt is an introduction to the youth development models that drive our work. Please call us for literature.

**Developmental Assets:** This model for effective dialogues is based on lessons learned by the Search Institute in its research of 250,000 young people grades 6-12. The research identifies 40 building blocks or “developmental assets”, from family support and positive peer influence to school performance, cultural competence, and self-esteem (see Attachment 3). Research has shown that all young people need these assets to grow up healthy, competent, and caring. When taken together, the assets have proven to be powerful shapers of young people’s behavior. The more assets young people experience, the more they engage in positive behaviors, such as volunteering and succeeding in school. The fewer they have, the more likely they are to engage in risk-taking behaviors, such as alcohol and other drug use, antisocial behavior, and violence. Of the 250,000 children in the Search Institute’s study, 76 percent experience 20 or fewer of the 40 building blocks. See Attachment 3 on page 21 for the power of assets to protect and to promote healthy lifestyles.

**Resiliency Theory:** Adults have come to believe that the extensive risks in children’s lives, which are real, doom an increasing number of children and youth to negative outcomes – dropping out of school, using drugs, going to prison. Resiliency programs offer a more positive and accurate perspective of a child’s growth and development. Resiliency programs offer the hope that many, if not most, of the children who experience stress, trauma, and “risks” in their lives can bounce back. The programs challenge people who run activities for children to focus more on strengths instead of deficits. Research has demonstrated that schools and community groups can use six factors that foster the development of resiliency in children and mitigate risk-taking behavior: meaningful participation; high expectations; caring and support; prosocial bonding; clear and consistent boundaries; and life skills.

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Want to learn more? Visit us on the web: [www.ctassets.org](http://www.ctassets.org)

For additional information about our programs, or to make a charitable contribution, please write or call:

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<thead>
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Understanding Assets and People As Resources

**Vision:** Connecticut Assets Network envisions people living in vibrant communities where everyone is a resource and makes a difference. Healthy Communities are places where people are respected, connected, and involved.

“Problem Free is not the same as health, a concept which demands the pursuit of the positive as much or more than the reduction of the negative.”

--Peter Benson, 1996

“We need to think of kids (and all people) as problem solvers, rather than problems to be solved…Kids (and all citizens) are municipal resources.”

--Nan Henderson, 1997
Getting People to Come to a Fishbowl Forum

The success of this type of forum is dependent on what is being addressed and to whom it may or may not be targeted to. The group sponsoring the forum decides the topic or if there will be a topic. As you will note later, the participants design Fishbowl Forums and therefore sometimes inviting a certain group or groups to the table is advantageous. Here are some ideas to get a group together:

- “Open Forum” – advertise the event using a flyer or brochure (see attachments 2.1 – 2.3) to include the date, time, place and discussion topic. Everyone is welcome.

- Targeting specific institutions / roles in the community / stakeholders and inviting only those individuals in order to address something very specific.

- “Invited Only” – each person “hand picks” another individual to bring to the forum in order to target a specific audience.

Topics could include: teens and adults discussing issues of concern to both, violence and the discussion of conflict resolution, authority figures – boss or mentor?, Character – responsibility at home and school, values and virtues, racial diversity, violence, or any other pressing topic that may be of relevance to the group.

Other hints in getting people to attend the forum:
- Be creative with invitations no matter what type of group you are inviting (see Attachment 1)
- Serve refreshments (you may want to get these donated from local businesses or groups)
Suggested Outline for a Fishbowl Forum  
(Approximately 2 hours in length)

Registration – name tags, assign to groups, handouts

A Greeting and Mingling Period (5 to 10 minutes) – provide refreshments (another alternative would be to have a mingling period of 30 minutes while serving a light supper)

Introductory (10 to 15 minutes)

- Welcome from the moderator
- Group Icebreaker
- Introduction to theme through a skit, video, panel, short presentation
- Guidelines for the Process

Small Group Process (approximately one hour—may include small group ice breaker exercise)

Concluding Process Discussion with whole group (15-20 minutes)

Set Up

It is preferable to hold a forum on “neutral territory” in your community. Survey your community to see who has a large room for you to use that will not be “threatening” to anyone attending. Consider all possibilities: churches, synagogues, colleges, businesses, hospitals, etc.

A registration table should be set up near the entrance where participants can sign in, be assigned to their circle, pick up any handouts, get a name tag, and any other pre-forum information that may be necessary.

The chairs are set up as two circles of chairs, one around the other. Set up as many groups of chairs as you need to accommodate as many participants as you have. There should be approximately eight to ten chairs in each group. Try to limit the number to no more than eight to ten individuals in each circle for the most effective participation. It is a good idea to have an extra chair in the inner circle, which stays empty for a person from the outside circle to come into the inner circle if they have a comment to share.

Assign people to a circle as they arrive. Use numbers or colors on name tags for group assignment designation. Make sure to not have the significant adult, siblings, or other relative in a young person’s life in the same group as this could make sharing true feelings and opinions difficult for both individuals.

The container in which the questions are placed could be “decorated” or applicable to the topic or audience at hand. For example, if discussing bosses and supervisors, hats could be used or you can use actual fishbowls.
You may want to consider the use of “Talking Sticks” in this type of group situation. Based on the notion of the Native American Peace Pipe, the “Talking Stick” is passed from person to person signifying that the person that is holding the “Talking Stick” is the one who is talking.

There are to be no observers, only participants.

**Guidelines for Discussion**

1. Please respect the confidentiality of each person in your group, including both their identity (name and other identifying features) and the contents of their sharing. Confidentiality creates a safe environment for all of us and opens the possibility of a deeper, more honest dialogue.
   
   “Who you see here, what you hear here, when you leave here, let it stay here.”

2. Respect the dignity of each person in the room, whether you agree with them or not. Remember that we are here to listen and learn from one another, not to establish “right from wrong”.

3. Listening is participating. If you would rather not talk about a particular questions, that’s okay.

4. If you are seated in the outer circle, you CAN NOT talk.

5. Use the discussion questions as guidelines. If you group goes off on a tangent that’s great. Our goal is to talk together, not to finish the questions.

6. Adults are asked to share as equal members of the group and not act as advisors or counselors.

7. Enjoy this opportunity to talk with folks in your community!
Listen

When I ask you to listen to me
and you start giving me advice,
you have not done what I asked.

When I ask you to listen to me
and you begin to tell me why I shouldn't feel that way,
you are tampering with my feelings.

When I ask you to listen to me
and you feel you have to do something
to solve my problem,
you have failed me, strange as that may seem.

Listen! All I asked was that you listen—
not talk or do—just hear me.

Advice is cheap:
Twenty-five cents will get you Dear Abby in
the newspaper.
And I can do that for myself.
I'm not that helpless.
But when you accept as a simple fact that
I do feel what I feel,
no matter how irrational,
then I can quit trying to convince you
and get about the business of understanding
what is behind this irrational feeling.
Irrational feelings make sense when we understand
what's behind them.

Don't give me advice or try to fix things.
Just listen. And let me work it out for myself.
- Author Unknown

Only then can we help each other!
Creating Questions

1. As each individual arrives, give them a piece(s) of paper to write down a question, comment, or statement pertinent to the forum’s topic to be discussed in a circle.

2. Once in their small groups, ask each person in the outer circle to write down one or two questions that they would like the people in the inner circle to discuss.

3. Collect information on a specific topic and ask each group to respond accordingly in their respective circles.

The questions are then placed into a container.

Examples of questions for you to use are included as Attachment 1.

The Facilitator

The facilitator must be able to control the group in an equitable way.

In addition to the Facilitator, which can be a youth for the adult groups and an adult for youth discussions, for each group, there should be two people, preferably adults, who will circulate about the room to see that everything is functioning properly. This is a good practice because often there may be issues or situations that a Facilitator is unable to handle alone and having reinforcement is important.

The facilitator must remain neutral, encourage everyone to talk but not “bully” anyone who wants to pass. The facilitator should use “clarifying questions”, i.e. Can you explain that further? How? Why? How do the rest of you feel about that?, What we can we do…?”

Conducting the Forum

Have everyone take his or her assigned seats in the appropriate circle.

Ask who would like to go first in the inner circle.

The inner circle begins by one person drawing a question and to give their comments or opinions. NOT EVERYONE HAS TO SHARE EVERYTIME and a person does have the prerogative to “pass” even if it is that person that has drawn the question. YOU MAY ONLY SPEAK IF SEATED IN THE INNER CIRCLE.

You may only talk if it is your turn. If using the “talking stick” it is passed from person to person in order to speak.

A person who is seated at the outside circle may take a seat if one is available on the inner circle to share a thought or comment. However, it is not to be the intent of that person to challenge any particular statement made in the circle.
Try to limit each person’s sharing time so as not to dominate the group.

After each person on the inner circle draws a topic, the members of the outer circle come to the inner circle and the inner circle members move to the outer circle and the process begins again.

If time permits, after both groups have had a chance to discuss questions posed by the “other” group, allow the two groups to have some dialogue. If time further permits, bring everyone back together for a brief, 10 to 15 minutes, discussion of “general themes” and perhaps post “action ideas” on a flip chart.
That was Great….Now What?

(reprinted with permission from “Please Talk With Me” a publication of Project Adventure, Hamilton, MA)

Following the Fishbowl Forum, meet with everyone who was involved in the planning and facilitating that evening. Also, invite participants who showed a strong interest in future forums. Ask each other the following questions:

1. What aspects of the evening went well?
2. What could be improved next time?
3. Should we plan another Fishbowl Forum? For what audience?
4. Are there other community activities that would encourage continuation of the healthy interactions that emerged or would address some of the concerns raised during the forum?
5. Who are the people in our community that we should ask to join our efforts?
6. Did particular topics emerge during the event that should be explored in future Fishbowl Forums?
7. What would an appropriate format for our next Fishbowl Forum?
8. Should we write a new format of our own?

(you may want to pose these questions on feedback form and given to all participants at the end of the forum)

Try to keep your evaluation of the Fishbowl Forum positive in tone – the purpose is simply to affirm what went well and to learn from your experience. When you discuss future plans, naturally consider sponsoring future Fishbowl Forums, but don’t put limits on your explorations of possible follow-up ideas. For example, having fun together may seem to be an appropriate follow-up to learning to get to know each other through dialogue.

Don’t be alarmed if your group generates more ideas for additional Fishbowl Forums and other activities than they can possibly implement. Think about other groups and individuals in your community who have similar concerns. Invite them to meet with you to explore ideas for improving youth-adult dialogue in your community.

If you decide to sponsor additional Fishbowl Forums, consider various formats and topics.

The conversations that occur before, during, and after Fishbowl Forums will often direct you toward future Fishbowl Forum topics.
RESOURCE LIST


Nan Henderson, Bonnie Benard, and Nancy Sharp-Light, 2000, *Schoolwide Approaches For Fostering Resiliency*, Rio Rancho, NM.


Search Institute, 1999, *Taking Asset Building Personally: An Action and Reflection Workbook*, Minneapolis, MN.

Search Institute, 2000, *You Have to Live It: Building Developmental Assets in School Communities*, VIDEO, Minneapolis, MN.

David Blumenkrantz, insert year, *Rites of Passage*, Glastonbury, CT.


Attachment 1

Sample Questions for Fishbowl Forums
Attachment 1

Questions for Fishbowls
The following questions are illustrative of the kinds of questions that come up at a Fishbowl Forum. Often, however, the best questions come from participants at the beginning of the forum.

General Forum

1. If you don’t want me to drink on the weekend, why do you get high? (or drink)
2. If you care about me, why are the lights out the door locked when I get home?
3. Why are you so angry?
4. Why are we stressed out? Why do you expect so much from us?
5. Why don’t you listen to me?
6. What makes a good parent for a teen?

Forum in the Wake of a Tragedy

1. How common is binge drinking? Is/was this unusual behavior (e.g., binge drinking every weekend)
2. Do adults tune into kids in trouble?
3. What would you do if you knew a friend was in trouble (e.g., drinking, drugging, depressed, suicidal)?
4. Where can kids go for help? What if they will not talk to an adult?
5. Where can teens go for fun? To just hang out?

Forum on School and Community Violence

1. Is violence an issue in the schools?
2. Do you feel safe at school? In the community? How do you define “safety” anyway? (e.g., physical vs. emotional “safety”)
3. How can schools be made safer? What do you think about the safety measures your school has taken?
4. What do you do when you are mad?

*Forum on “Bosses” and “Mentors”*

1. What is a boss? What is a mentor?
2. Are bosses necessarily bad? What’s the difference between a “good” boss and a “bad” boss?
3. Can bosses have bosses?
4. Can someone be both a boss and a mentor? How?

*Forum on Character Education*

1. What defines “character?” Where does it come from?
2. What if your rules at school are different from those at home (e.g., related to discipline, rewards, attitude toward education)?
3. How do you know when a teacher cares?
4. How do you deal with people with different values than your own? How do you learn about those differences?
5. Can schools teach “character?” How?

*Questions through the Eyes of Generations*
(Parents answer the questions reflecting back to when they were of a certain age, youth answer them at the age they are presently)

1. What was it like for you to start high school? Were you excited, fearful, nervous, etc. Why?
2. Do / Did you know your grandparents? If so, describe your relationship?
3. How often does / did your family eat together?
4. Do / Did you participate in family events? What kind?
5. What are / were your friends like and what do / did you do together?
6. How do you think your parents view / viewed your friends?
7. Where do / did you feel most supported and accepted in your life and why?
8. What really bothers / bothered you about your community? Other kids? Adults? Your family?

9. Describe the members of your family and your day to day life with them.

10. As a parent how will / have you changed the way you relate to your children compared to your parents?

11. What kind of peer pressure do / did you encounter?

12. Were / Are you able to talk to your parents about those pressures? Why? Why not?

13. How do / did you spend your free time?

14. What do / did you value most? Then (for parents)?

15. What one thing would you like to tell your kids / parents that has been too difficult for you to tell them?
Attachment 2:

Sample Flyers / Announcements
Attachment 3:

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DEVELOPMENTAL ASSETS

THE POWER OF ASSETS
NOTES