



ENGAGING YOUNG PEOPLE IN
HOW
LEARNING
HAPPENS

Ten Steps for Success

A companion guide to *All of Who I Am*,
a report from the Center for Promise at
America's Promise Alliance



This discussion guide was developed in connection with the release of *All of Who I Am*, a research report from the Center for Promise, the applied research institute of America's Promise Alliance. The report explores the integration of social, emotional, and cognitive development¹ from young people's own perspectives in six different learning environments across the country.

WHY LISTENING TO YOUNG PEOPLE MATTERS

America's Promise Alliance believes that every young person deserves to succeed, and every adult is responsible for making that happen. To understand what young people want and need from their learning environments, adults need to ask them—and listen to the answers.

The approach and the questions featured in this guide are based on the qualitative research methods the Center for Promise used for the *All of Who I Am* report about how young people experience and express the ways that social, emotional, and cognitive development are integrated in their schools and after-school programs.

While not every community can commission its own rigorous research, any community, school, or program leader can take steps toward understanding young people's perspectives about how learning environments might better support their social, emotional, and cognitive development. This publication offers a practical guide to how adults might prepare for, organize, and reflect on similar conversations with young people in school or community settings.

As you read the ten steps offered here, you'll notice that the majority of them focus on preparing for the conversation. Reflecting on why, where, and how you want to talk with young people will set both you and the group up for success. Once you've taken those steps, you'll be ready to refine the questions you want to ask, engage in dialogue, listen to young people's answers, and take action.

¹ America's Promise Alliance has decided to use "cognitive" rather than the narrower term "academic" as a counterpart to the social and emotional dimensions of learning. Along with our partners, we want to emphasize that young people's learning and development happens beyond academic settings. The term "academic" sometimes appears in this report because the research questions were framed in relationship to recommendations from the National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development.

The Ten Steps: Before, During, and After Your Listening Opportunity

NOTES

STEP 1: Define your purpose.

Once you've decided to engage young people in a conversation, ask yourself what you want to learn and why. Will the conversation shape a decision you need to make? Will it inform a policy conversation? Does it have the potential to shape professional development for adults in a particular school or after-school program? Will it help you think about the design of your school and program? Clarifying the purpose of the conversation will help you answer other important questions, including which young people to invite.

STEP 2: Identify young people to engage.

Consider the following when identifying young people to speak with about social, emotional, and cognitive development:

- **Seek out multiple points of view.** To get a fuller picture of “youth perspective,” choose young people from diverse backgrounds—considering a variety of factors such as race, income, recency of immigration, bilingualism, family caregiving, and levels of participation in school, community, and work activities. Young people can be engaged individually or in a group, as time and resources allow. For group conversations, seek to engage at least three and no more than eight young people at a time. Having at least three young people in the group allows some synergy among the voices; not allowing the group to grow too big gives all participants ample opportunity to contribute.
- **Include formal and informal leaders.** Make an effort to reach out beyond the young people who participate easily in school and community activities. In addition to young people on community boards, student councils, and other governing bodies, seek out informal leaders who are influencing their peers in day-to-day interactions, or quieter voices whose perspectives aren't usually heard. You will learn valuable, and maybe challenging, information when you include young people who have historically been excluded from invitations to influence policies and practices.

STEP 3: Choose a place where young people feel comfortable, and create a welcoming environment.

When choosing the place for conversation, think about spaces in your school or community where young people already feel welcome, or where they have positive or neutral associations. For example, the cafeteria or another common gathering spot may be a better choice than the conference table in the principal's office. Offer a seating arrangement that allows everyone to interact easily, like a circle of chairs. Consider where you, as the conversation leader, will sit so that you can easily make eye contact with each person, at their level.

STEP 4: Show that you respect young people's time and their expertise.

Researchers often give participants in group and individual interviews a small incentive or modest compensation for their time. This serves several purposes, including demonstrating appreciation, generating buy-in for participation, and enabling young people who might need support for transportation or for lost work hours to be part of the conversations. Depending on the young people's circumstances, compensation can take many different forms. Transit cards or passes, combined with a meal during the session, are good incentives if the setting for the conversation is far from the young people's homes. If you are holding the session during regular school or program hours, you might offer a small gift card, credit for community service, or credit for extra services that your program might offer.

STEP 5: Co-create the agenda with participants.

Seek input from young people about the goal you have in mind for your time together, and ask them if they might want to add anything. Prioritize the topics they are most interested in discussing with you. A co-created agenda can help participants feel ownership over the conversation, and is another way to both demonstrate respect for young people's expert perspectives and to share power with them. [Search Institute](#) has written about specific actions adults can take that express power-sharing in relationships with youth—and why this is important to young people's development.

STEP 6: Ensure privacy, establish confidentiality, and obtain consent.

When inviting young people to talk with you, arrange to have the conversation in a place with an appropriate level of privacy. Clarify roles, goals, and expectations for the conversation, state how you intend to use any information collected, and set and obtain clear guidelines for confidentiality (verbally or in writing).² It is critical to note that the limits of confidentiality may vary geographically by state or community, the particular institution and/or learning setting, individual roles (e.g., researcher, teacher, counselor, mentor), professional ethical guidelines and legal mandates, individual characteristics of the young person (e.g., age), and according to a wide range of additional situational factors. Prior to engaging in potentially sensitive conversations with young people, it is imperative to gain a clear understanding of the unique scope and limits of confidentiality relevant to your situation and, when necessary, consult with appropriate experts, supervisors, or authorities. When taking written notes, consider using aliases for each young person. Be careful not to attach young people's names to sensitive information they may share; if quoting a young person directly, remove identifying information like proper names and specific places. Consider reporting out overall themes from the conversation, rather than specific stories.

INDIVIDUAL OR GROUP CONVERSATIONS?

Consider whether to organize individual or group conversations. There are advantages to each approach that are worth considering.

INDIVIDUAL (DEDICATED 30–45 MINUTES)	GROUP (DEDICATED 90–120 MINUTES)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Some young people feel most comfortable sharing in a 1:1 setting.• Individual participants can go into greater depth in their storytelling.• In some cases, you might want to follow group interviews with a few individual interviews to go into greater depth on a particular topic.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Some young people feel most comfortable sharing in a group setting, where they are supported by their peers.• Participants can build on each other's responses.• Being in a group can mitigate adult-youth power differentials that might be amplified in 1:1 conversations.

² If participants are under 18, consider whether you need parental consent for the conversation. This may vary depending on the setting and the subject matter.

STEP 7: Reflect on your own biases.

Your own beliefs and values will influence who you're likely to invite, how you ask questions and listen to the answers, and how you interpret what you hear.

Before entering a one-on-one or group conversation, it's helpful to take time to reflect on how your situation and context—including social position, beliefs, ways you identify, and life experiences—could influence how you listen to, empathize, and engage with young people. Here are some questions you can consider.

- **Identity.** What are your identities? Consider your race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, disability status, immigration status, religious identity, household income, region of the country you live in, and educational attainment, among other identifiers. What do you consider to be the most influential experiences of your life? How do your identities and experiences influence the way you see the world and interact with others? How might these be similar to, or different from, the young people you're in dialogue with?
- **Beliefs about youth.** What are your attitudes and beliefs about young people and where do those attitudes and beliefs come from? How might your own growing-up experience as well as your current power as an adult influence how you show up in the conversation? Are there any beliefs that might get in the way of your listening to young people with an open mind and curious spirit?
- **How young people might see you.** Think about feedback you have received about the way you show up in different kinds of spaces and how others read your personality and intentions. If you have not received this kind of feedback before, request it from those who can give you honest insights. What can help you show up as someone young people can trust with their stories? How might you counter any biases you or youth might have toward "adultism," a particular form of ageism that can show up in interactions between adults and young people?
- **Power.** What is your relationship with power? What gives someone power? What power do you have, especially vis-à-vis the young people you will engage in conversation? How can you work to share power with young people in a conversation?
- **Triggers and cues.** Are there ideas, behaviors, or aspects of one's appearance (e.g., clothing, piercings, tattoos) that you know tend to make you uncomfortable, or lead you to make an assumption about someone? If so, what are they? How might you notice and manage your response if these are present in conversations with young people?

STEP 8: Warm up, ask your key questions, and cool down.

This is the heart of the conversation itself. In a 90-minute group conversation, plan to spend five to seven minutes at the beginning on a “warm up” or icebreaker, about 60 minutes on focused dialogue, and seven to 10 minutes at the end on reflections and next steps.

Warm up (5-7 minutes). Choose an activity that can help participants establish positive rapport and trust with you and with each other. Some easy ones that also get people moving are “[The Wind Blows...](#)” or “[Group Count](#).”

Ask key questions (60 minutes). The guiding questions that the Center for Promise team asked during data collection for the *All of Who I Am* report are shown on the last page; these can help you shape your own questions based on your local circumstances. The ultimate goal is to **enable young people’s perspectives to influence the policies and practices** that shape their learning experiences.

Cool down (7-10 minutes). At the end of the conversation, invite participants to reflect on the conversation, including what went well and what did not go well. Be prepared to discuss with participants the next steps you will take (and what role they can play) to compile, communicate, and eventually act on the insights that arose from the conversation. Consider the methods and timeline for these activities.

STEP 9: Document themes and stories.

It is important to capture accurately what young people share, bearing in mind any terms of confidentiality that have been established. By having a record of the conversation, caring adults can share what they learn from young people to influence policy and practice. You may also want to have a stage in your process that allows young people to review and comment on the way that you summarize the information from the conversation.

Be mindful that the documentation method used (note-taking, video recording, audio recording, etc.) and how the terms of confidentiality are framed may influence how comfortable and candid participants are. Video and audio recordings can ensure accurate documentation of young people’s insights, but may be perceived as intrusive. Note-taking may be perceived as less intrusive than video or audio recordings, but it can also limit how much a single adult facilitator can capture and may cause the facilitator to be less engaged in the conversation. One way to handle this is to have one facilitator and one note-taker, though the note-taker needs to be careful to stay in the background so that the facilitator’s focus stays on the young people’s dialogue.

STEP 10: Listen.

When young people take the time and energy to share their perspectives—in some cases, making themselves vulnerable in the process of sharing—caring adults need to listen. As with any conversation, it's good to keep in mind that you want to:

- Listen without interrupting, explaining, or defending.
- Allow for silence and short pauses after asking a question.
- Let young people finish a complete thought, even when they are searching for words.
- Allocate ample time for young people to share, and to build on each other's thinking.

You may want to ask clarifying questions as you go along; however, be mindful of staying curious and learning as much as possible rather than using the conversation as an opportunity to insert your own perspective.

Finally, close the loop by reflecting on your purpose and working with young people to make the kinds of changes their feedback suggests.

Ultimately, caring adults must recognize that the discussion is not about you or airing your points of view. **The discussion is about uncovering insights from young people who are experts about their own lives and about what they need to succeed.**

Learning from Young People’s Experiences with Social, Emotional, and Cognitive Development

Based on the questions the Center for Promise research team asked during the data collection phase of the *All of Who I Am* report, here are three broad topics to explore so you can learn more about how young people in your setting experience social, emotional, and cognitive development. The questions below explore:

- A. What it feels like to be a participant in a particular school or program, including what makes young people feel welcome and safe;
- B. What it means to be a “good student” or to be successful in a particular school or program; and
- C. How social and emotional learning are purposefully integrated into the school or program.

These questions alone may lead to half an hour or more of discussion when engaging an individual young person or as much as an hour or more of discussion when engaging a group. Ask the follow-up questions listed below the “guiding question” to learn about specific details of students’ experiences and ideas, if those details do not arise naturally in the discussion. You will want to customize the questions with any particular terms or language that is used in your own community. You can also ask fewer questions to hone in on particular interests or to fit within a shorter amount of time.

GUIDING QUESTION A

What does it feel like to be a student at this school (or a participant in this program)?

- How does [school name or program name] make you feel welcomed and accepted? If it doesn’t, why not?
- In what ways does this program make you feel safe? If this program does not make you feel safe, why not?
- Can you describe the adults in this school/program? How do they interact with students? How do students feel about the adults here?
- Are there adults in the school/program who you trust and feel comfortable talking to about what is going on in and/or outside school? What makes you trust and feel comfortable talking to them?
- What are the relationships like among the young people in the program here?
- In what ways does your family get involved with the school/program? How does this school/program work to welcome them or push them away?
- If you could change one thing about this program or school, what would it be? Why?

NOTES

GUIDING QUESTION B

Tell us about what it means to be a good student at your school or program.

- What expectations do you think adults in [school or program name] have for you? As a student in the school/program? For your life in the future? How do these expectations compare with any goals you've set for yourself?
- How do people communicate those expectations? Can you give us some examples?
- How do people in [your school or program] support you and your peers to reach your goals?
- In what ways does this program make you feel important or empowered?
- Tell us about your favorite projects at [school/program name] and what made them so meaningful for you?
- Tell us about your favorite part of this program? Why is it your favorite part? What about your *least* favorite? Why is that?

GUIDING QUESTION C

Relationships and feelings can influence how people think and learn, a concept that is often called social and emotional learning. How does social and emotional learning happen at your school or program?

- Think about all the different activities in your school day. Are there activities or school structures where part of the goal is to help with the social and emotional skills? (Follow-up question: Do you think those activities actually do what they are meant to do?)
- Are there ways that the activities you're describing are woven into your classwork or academic assignments? How does that happen?
- Tell us about some ways teachers and administrators have taught you that really worked? Why do you think that this worked?
- Tell us about some ways teachers and administrators have taught you that have not worked? Why do you think that these approaches didn't work?

About *All of Who I Am*

All of Who I Am is based on a qualitative study conducted by the Center for Promise, engaging 100+ young people at six sites across the country. The research questions focused on how young people experience integrated approaches to social, emotional, and cognitive learning, with particular attention to how young people's experiences were aligned with the recommendations in *A Nation at Hope*, the landmark 2019 report from the Aspen Institute National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development.

For questions about this guide and the accompanying report email cfp@americaspromise.org.



About America's Promise Alliance

America's Promise Alliance is the driving force behind a nationwide movement to improve the lives and futures of America's children and youth. Bringing together national nonprofits, businesses, community and civic leaders, educators, citizens, and young people with a shared vision, America's Promise leads campaigns and initiatives that spark collective action to overcome the barriers that stand in the way of young people's success. Through these collective leadership efforts, the Alliance does what no single organization alone can do: catalyze change on a scale that reaches millions of young people.



About the Center for Promise

The Center for Promise is the applied research institute for America's Promise Alliance. The Center's work is grounded in positive youth development, and its team is committed to adding young people's voices to national conversations on topics that affect their well-being.



About How Learning Happens

Science confirms what educators, parents, and caregivers have long known: learning is social, emotional, and cognitive. The most powerful learning happens when we pay attention to all of these aspects—not separately, but woven together, just like how our brains work. Through How Learning Happens, America's Promise Alliance is advancing this understanding about how learning happens and helping to fuel the growing movement to educate children as whole people—combining their social and emotional well-being with academic growth and success. Our effort builds on the work of many organizations and coalitions to advance a whole child approach to learning and development. We do so by developing a shared and inclusive message about how learning happens, sharing this message with a broader audience of stakeholders, and infusing the lessons from how learning happens into our signature campaign work, and exploring the perspectives of young people about how learning happens.

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