

A Teen-Led Community Dialogue Guide for Public Libraries



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About This Guide

Public libraries are vital community centers offering resources, activities, and other learning opportunities. In order to best serve their communities, libraries must look outward to discover more about how community members think and feel about important topics and to make connections with local organizations and partners that can help address these issues to achieve a common goal. Many libraries already have teen advisory boards to help plan teen programs. But how can we utilize this type of input at a higher level? Teen-led *Community Dialogues* are one way in which libraries can more fully engage the youth they serve and learn from their experiences. While this guide and program are designed to help libraries address STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) topics with their communities, the strategy can be applied to any challenging issue that affects teens in your community.

This guide provides information for public libraries on how to host and conduct teen-led *Community Dialogues*. It was originally developed as part of the STAR Library Network and its *NASA@ My Library* initiative. This guide is a tested and vetted resource for all public libraries to begin the conversations that can lead to building strong, durable relationships with their community. Read on to find out how opening your doors can open new doors!

Here's what people are saying about their experience with *Community Dialogues*:

"There is no doubt that the Community Dialogues are beneficial to all parties. I think this method should be employed more often when we are considering all kinds of services, initiatives and programs for our community."

– Lisa Jackson, Youth Services Librarian, African-American Research Library and Cultural Center, Fort Lauderdale, FL

"Being a teenager myself, I find a lot of underrepresentation and lack of programs for humans my age. Because of this, teenagers are a quiet voice in the chaos of improvement. There are many issues that teens face without support. By planning a dialogue I hope to help the American teens who feel they do not have a place to speak up or make a change."

– Willa Kopp-DeVol, Student, Animas High School, Durango, CO



What is a *Community Dialogue*?

A *Community Dialogue* is a loosely facilitated discussion that provides the opportunity for library staff and community leaders or members to discuss common, community-based challenges or aspirations.

Community Dialogues can help your library:

- Create meaningful interactions with the teens in your community
- Expand your understanding of patrons' feelings about their local library and its programs, including programming related to STEM
- Have a conversation about how the library can better serve ethnically, economically, and geographically underserved and underrepresented audiences
- Better connect with local organizations and potential future partners that have shared interests with the library and community

These events are about more than leaving the room with a list of to-dos and answers to all the questions. Rather, they are about discussing topics and issues in an inclusive and uninhibited environment, with community representatives and stakeholders.

Teen-led *Community Dialogue* Goals

- 1 Strengthen library's ability to support teen-led initiatives
- 2 Identify under-represented community groups
- 3 Identify possible collaborations and partnerships within the community

Note:

Teen-led dialogues aren't just for teens! (Unless you want them to be). Having teens speak with influential community members allows them to be part of creating solutions to challenges while learning themselves that their opinions matter.

"I liked the way it (the Guide) was structured and well organized. I also liked the way it emphasized the importance of Teen voices because they are also impacted by changes in their communities that stem from adult decisions. It allows teens to feel comfortable because instead of being ignored, they are being uplifted."

-Kezia Phillip



Planning Your Community Dialogue

Who to Invite

The focus should be on bringing in new partners and more voices to the conversation and connecting with groups not normally represented at the library. In order to keep the audience size manageable, try to focus on a few groups for each dialogue. You can schedule more *Community Dialogues* in the future to gain additional insights.

Invitees could include stakeholders and individuals from groups such as:

- Teen advisory groups or other interested groups in the community
- Education (e.g., universities, colleges, community colleges, local school districts, teachers, PTA/PTO, homeschool representatives, afterschool providers, etc.)
- Local government agencies and government labs
- The Chamber of Commerce and business organizations (e.g., tech companies, engineering firms, advertising agencies)
- Representatives from traditionally underserved/underrepresented groups (e.g., tribal elders/leaders, Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, immigration and naturalization services staff, cultural centers, refugee centers)
- Local chapters of professional STEM societies (e.g., AAAS, American Astronomical Society, Society of Women Engineers, American Indian Science and Engineering Society, National Society of Black Engineers, Society for Hispanic Professional Engineers, Society for Advancement of Chicanos and Native Americans in Science)
- STEM engagement groups (e.g., science museums, zoos, children's museums, NASA Solar System Ambassadors, Space Grant program, amateur astronomy clubs)
- Clubs, groups (e.g., Kiwanis Club, Scouts, 4-H) and places of worship
- Social service groups (e.g., YMCA, Rotary, literacy groups, local food pantry, homeless shelters)
- Local media (e.g., local newspaper, radio and TV)
- Friends of the library, members of the library board

One pilot library held two dialogues on the same day with two different groups:

"(Dialogues) would be beneficial to our community by deepening its understanding of the science and by helping the library better understand the topics and issues patrons would like it to focus on."

-Salma Essaidi



How to Invite

We suggest an ideal size of 8 to 20 participants for your Dialogue to ensure that you gain enough input, but also can allow everyone's voices to be heard. When inviting potential participants, consider personalized invitations rather than bulk emails or flyers. Make sure to remind participants a week, and a few days before the conversation! The following tips can also help you reach your target number of participants.

A personalized approach will help increase your chances of recruiting participants. Try to personally invite people and utilize existing partners, library staff, and volunteers. Make sure to provide information about why you are having a dialogue and explain that it's not an information session, meeting, or focus group, but rather a chance for the community to come together and learn from one another. You can also have informal conversations with individuals to gauge interest and find out when they would be able to attend. Be sure to provide potential invitees with information about your library goals and the need for the teen-led *Community Dialogue* so they understand what they are being invited to.

Directed invitations can also help control numbers and ensure your group is not too large. If you are interested in reaching many stakeholder groups, you should also consider holding multiple dialogues to keep numbers manageable.

Follow-up any initial conversations with formal invitations at least four weeks before the dialogue and send a reminder a day or two before the event. A sample invitation can be found in Appendix A.

Suggested Timeline

3 months before

- Make a list of potential stakeholder groups that you want to engage
- Determine the best way to reach out to them. Do you have any staff, volunteers, or partners who can make an introduction?
- Make a plan for reaching out to these groups
- Book a venue (ideally your library, but consider a more neutral ground if there are reasons to do so such as logistics or you want to hold the meeting at a partner location)
- Start contacting potential invitees to gauge their interest

Remember:

You're supporting your teens in running these dialogues. Encourage them to draft and send these invitations themselves, since they'll be the ones interacting with the attendees.



and availability.

- Begin brainstorming discussion questions.
- Identify your facilitator, note takers, and assistants. If possible, include them in conversations about discussion questions so they understand the goals of the dialogue.

1-2 months before

- Send out formal invitations and the project summary. If refreshments will be served (which is highly recommended!), be sure to include this in your invitation.
- Request potential discussion questions in the invitations (make sure you share with them your draft questions!)

3-4 week before

- Finalize discussion questions

1 week before

- Briefing session with facilitators, note takers, and assistants.
- Reminder invitations either via email or phone.

Where to Hold the Dialogue

Your library can be a great place to hold a *Community Dialogue* event, but other venues should be considered as well, especially if your goal is to reach groups or individuals who do not normally frequent the library. *Libraries Transforming Communities* suggests looking for a venue that:

- People are familiar with and use frequently
- Is considered to be part of the community. Usually this excludes government or “official” places
- Is available in the evenings and/or on weekends
- Offers a comfortable environment
- Is not too noisy or full of distractions

Note:

This timeline is just a suggestion.

If your teens are doing this as part of a service learning project, remember timelines may be constricted.



- Is easily accessible to all participants: plenty of parking (free is best!), centrally located, safe, near public transportation, accessible to those with disabilities
- Is affordable given project resources

Some suggested venues (other than your library) include:

- Community centers
- Community organizations (e.g., YMCA)
- Recreation centers
- Outside/informal locations (lend to more open conversation)
- Wherever your community already is! –Consider asking leaders of underserved or underrepresented communities where the Dialogue should be held before you even begin planning

When and How Long

A typical dialogue will last 90 minutes to 2 hours, so you should consider the audience you wish to attract, the time of day, and when they may be available for this length of time. More people may be available during evening and weekends. Also check your community calendar for events that target the same audience as your dialogue and schedule it for a different time so that they don't conflict. You may also wish to hold a series of dialogues at different times to reach more stakeholders.

What to Ask

In general, the discussion questions for *Community Dialogues* are focused on identifying key issues in the community and possible next steps for solving them. The following are ideas for how to structure your dialogue.

Hard-hitting Issues that Affect Local Teens

- What difficult topics make teens feel unsafe or unheard in the community (eg. school shootings, social media bullying, politics, drugs, etc.)
- In an increasingly digital world, how do teens create a sense of community?

Popular Quote:

“Public libraries are poised to play a leading role in helping individuals and communities adapt to our fast changing world.”

– Rising to the Challenge

Potential discussion topics suggested by teens for teen-led dialogues

- *The effect of AI on schoolwork and future job prospects*
- *How Climate Change will affect our future*
- *Opportunities to do science in our community to strengthen college applications*
- *Health and Safety concerns with electric bikes and scooters*
- *What sea level rise means for the future of coastal communities*
- *How can we use science to increase mental health?*



- What extra-curricular options are there for teens in the community? How can the library help?
- What organizations (with resources and connections) do teens already utilize in our community? Are these organizations represented at our Dialogue? If not, how do we engage them?

Underserved and Underrepresented Groups

- What populations from our community are not participating in library programs? What is the best way to invite them to a future dialogue? (This question should be asked at all *Community Dialogues*)
- What's your perception about why these underserved audience(s) don't frequent the library as often (e.g., other activities/resources in the community meet their needs, difficulties getting to the library, aren't aware of library resources, don't feel welcomed, library rules unfamiliar, etc.)?
- Do you notice any difference in participation in library programming/activities between different groups of people? Are there certain events/programming that certain population segments avoid, or come to at higher numbers?
- What types of activities/programs would be most welcoming to the groups who aren't currently attending programs at our library?
- How can events like science/engineering festivals, or Family Days help attract underserved audiences to our library?

Remember:

Teens tend to isolate themselves in groups (and they definitely know who's in what group). Utilize their knowledge to bring diverse audiences to your dialogue.



Hosting Your Teen-led Community Dialogue

Staffing

To host your *Community Dialogue*, you'll need to recruit a facilitator, note-taker, and assistants. The roles of each are described below. You can look to library staff, volunteers, or other community members with an interest in the topic to fill these roles. When possible, you should include these individuals (especially facilitators and note-takers) in planning conversations so they understand the goals and bigger picture of the dialogue. Remember, these roles should be filled by teens if possible.

- **Facilitators** introduce and guide the *Community Dialogue*. Effective facilitators are good listeners who are curious about what people think and able to remain neutral about the topic being discussed. The facilitator does NOT need to be an expert on the issues being discussed.
- **Note-takers** record important points discussed during the dialogue. Effective note-takers are observant and able to capture the essence of a conversation without inserting their own thoughts or ideas. They do NOT need to record every word that was said, but be able to identify important details and relate them to the larger goals. Some exact quotes are helpful, however, when analyzing what was discussed after the meeting.
- **Assistants**: to help with set-up, welcoming people, etc.
- **Translators**: someone who can provide translation services in various languages (e.g., Spanish) might be very useful and could be seen as culturally sensitive.

Setting up the Venue

A comfortable setting will go a long way in promoting good conversation!

- Ensure the space is well lit and free of distractions
- Set up a screen and projector for PowerPoint slides (recommended if they are visually appealing, e.g., not too many words)
- Set up chairs in a circle, or semi-circle if using a projector

From Libraries Transforming Communities: A Step-by-step Guide for "Turning Outward" to your Community

Ground Rules:

1. **Have a "kitchen table" conversation.** Everyone participates; no one dominates.
2. **There are no "right answers."** Draw on your own experiences, views and beliefs. You do not need to be an expert.
3. **Keep an open mind.** Listen carefully and try hard to understand the views of those who disagree with you.
4. **Help keep the discussion on track.** Stick to the questions; try not to ramble.
5. **It is okay to disagree, but don't be disagreeable.** Respond to others how you want to be responded to.
6. **Have fun!**



- Provide printouts of the discussion questions and ground rules for attendees (see Page 8 for an example of ground rules)
- Set up a laptop with a copy of the discussion questions for the note taker to use
- Provide refreshments
- Provide nametags for staff and participants
- Have a sign-in sheet to gather names, place of business/affiliation, mailing addresses, and email addresses in order to be able to contact people after the event

Outline of the Event

The following information, adapted from *Libraries Transforming Communities*, provides an outline of the *Community Dialogue* and sample script for you to adapt for your individual needs.

1. **Facilitator introduces themselves, thanks any organizations or individuals involved in organizing the dialogue, and thanks participants for attending.**

"Hi everyone, my name is <name> and I am <role> at <organization>. I want to thank <other individuals> for helping us organize this dialogue. I also want to thank all of you for taking the time to join us today."

2. **Describe what a Community Dialogue is, its purpose, and your goals for this dialogue. Provide definitions for any terms that may need clarification. You may want to explain what you mean by underserved audiences.**

"A Community Dialogue is a chance for us to come together and discuss issues affecting our community. We are also interested in exploring ways to reach underserved audiences, specifically, rural and geographically isolated areas. This would include Hispanics and Latinos, African Americans, American Indians, Alaska Natives, Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders, the economically disadvantaged, people with disabilities, women and girls. Our goals for this dialogue are to learn about the issues facing our community and teens, and to begin to develop potential solutions to these problems."

Library Quote:

"Participants took off running-I was barely able to get questions in, but it was all good because by themselves they covered most of the questions"

– Charles Diede, Fontana Library



3. Review the ground rules and confirm that everyone is ok with them (see Page 2 for examples of ground rules)

"Before we begin, we have provided you with some ground rules for this dialogue. Please take a few moments to read through them. (Pause.) Do these rules work for everyone?"

4. Explain your role as a facilitator.

"My role is to ask questions to help us have a good conversation. Since we want to learn your thoughts, I won't be offering my views although I may ask some follow-up questions to make sure I understand what you meant or to keep the conversation going. To make sure we hear from everyone, I may also ask you to hold off on comments at times."

5. Introduce the note-taker

"<Name of note taker> (point to note taker) will be taking notes to night to help us follow-up on what we discuss. The notes won't include anyone's name or be made public; we just want to make sure we catch what you're saying."

6. Have participants introduce themselves

"Before we begin, I'd like to have everyone share their name, organization, and reason for attending."

7. Go through the Discussion Questions (see next section for tips)

8. Wrap up: Thanks everyone for attending. State some of the take-away messages that you heard during the meeting. Don't provide any solutions at this time, but ensure that you will be following-up on what was discussed.

"Thanks so much for attending and sharing your thoughts with us. It seems like people are interested in finding out ways to connect economically disadvantaged youth who live outside of the city to more opportunities. Over the next few months we'll be working to follow-up up on this and other points that were discussed."

How can shy or quiet teens help run the Dialogue?

- Create artwork and text for flyers
- Share information about Dialogue Event with their groups and clubs
- Draft the questions for the Dialogue Event
- Take notes during the Dialogue Event
- Clean up transcript from Dialogue Event
- Run the slideshow/powerpoint

What if Participants aren't talking?

- Do an ice-breaker. They may feel silly, but it gets people talking.
- Do some group art
- Eat snacks first!
- Get them moving! Use a frisbee or beach ball to call on people.



Tips for Teen Facilitators

If you've never facilitated a discussion before, never fear! Here are some tips for addressing potential challenges you might face. You can find additional tips for facilitating dialogues in the resources listed at the end of this guide.

To get maximum participation and avoid a few voices dominating the conversation

- Make sure everyone has a chance to say something early on
- Ask: "Does anyone else have something to add?"
- Say: "We seem to be hearing from the same people. Let's give others a chance to talk."
- Call on people by name (make sure they have nametags!) if it looks like they're trying to jump in ("Susan, did you have something you wanted to say?")
- Remember: the conversation should be between the attendees, not an attendee and the facilitator. Speak only if needed to clarify something or keep the conversation moving forward.

If the conversation goes off topic for too long

- Relate it back to the main question ("We started off by asking (question). How does what you're talking about relate to this question?")
- If they continue to go off-topic say, "I hear what you are saying, but we need to focus on this question now."
- Set the idea aside in a "parking lot" for future consideration

If people are reluctant to talk

- Remind them that there are no right or wrong answers.
- Pause. It may feel uncomfortable, but people need time to gather their thoughts
- Reword the question

If people argue or the conversation gets heated

- As long as it's not mean-spirited, know that this is normal. This is an indication that the topic is interesting to attendees and that they are engaged (even though they may not agree on solutions, for example)

Library Quote:

"When the facilitator set the tone for a fluid conversation among attendees, they seemed to be more willing to jump in and provide insight and opinions. Participants were encouraged to gather close together (even though the room we were in was quite large) so that it was easier to hear one another and to participate in the discussion"

– Atlas Logan, Gwinnett County Public Library



- Say, “There seem to be different views about this. Why do you think that is?”
- Set ground rules in advance and refer back to them.
- Take a break (“Let’s take a 5 minute break and then revisit this”)

Also, keep in mind that these dialogues are meant to be an informal way for people to get to know and learn from one another; not a formal presentation. Give it a shot! The more sessions you run the more comfortable you’ll become. Visit the *STAR Net* Resources Section for additional resources for facilitating *Community Dialogues*.

After the Community Dialogue

The work doesn’t end with the *Community Dialogue*. In fact, this is just the beginning. Be sure to send out a thank you note to all participants and ensure them that you will be following-up on what was discussed. If you collected participants’ email addresses, you can set up a mailing list for quick communication and to contact them about relevant events and programming.

You can also consider planning an activity shortly after your *Community Dialogue* as a way to immediately engage your audience as one *STAR Net* pilot library did:

“We timed the Community Dialogue with a STEAM event the following Saturday. We had several different stations with learning tools and activities. The turnout was tremendous and it illustrated just how excited the community is about this kind of programming.”

– Kathy Condon-Boettcher, Director, Festus Public Library, Festus, MO

As a library, you will also want to schedule time to:

- **Reflect:** Who should have been there that wasn’t? Are there any topics that arose that you need more information about? Who can you talk to about this? Try to address any gaps at future *Community Dialogues*.
- **Summarize and Plan:** Go through your notes as a team. What were the big take-aways and action items? Determine who will be involved in putting a plan in place to follow-up on action items, and schedule future meetings to check the progress of this plan.

Library Quote:

“This dialogue was very useful in setting up collaborations. The attendees weren’t as keen on discussing issues as they were on talking and working together!”

– Mary Jenkins, Clarksdale Carnegie Public Library