



National League of Cities

ORGANIZING GUIDE

NLCS LITTLE KIDS, BIG PLANS WEEK
October 19-25, 2003



Institute for Youth, Education, and Families

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Introduction

The National League of Cities has designated October 19 - 25, 2003 as Little Kids, Big Plans Week. During this week, local officials nationwide will convene a variety of community forums focused on early childhood. These events offer city leaders the opportunity to raise awareness about the importance of early childhood development, celebrate existing programs, or launch new initiatives to improve outcomes for young children in their communities.

While the format of each community forum will vary, they will all be connected as part of a nationwide effort to promote municipal action supporting the healthy development of young children. Individual city events will be tied together by national publicity through *Nation's Cities Weekly* and a press event featuring NLC President John DeStefano, Jr., Mayor of New Haven, Conn.

This *Organizing Guide* is designed to assist cities in hosting a community forum on early childhood. The guide provides a list of suggested steps to follow in organizing an event and includes format options, sample agendas, and information about support NLC can offer. Please note that this is only a guide. There is no "right way" to host these events. Each city and town should feel free to develop an early childhood forum that meets the individual needs and unique circumstances in their community.

Step 1: Identify key outcomes or goals for the event.

The first step in organizing a community forum around early childhood is to determine the goals or desired outcomes for the event. What do you hope the gathering will accomplish? What are the two or three main results you are aiming for? Identifying specific outcomes will provide a clear focus for the event and will also impact key planning issues such as what format is chosen and who should be invited.

Key goals might include:

- **Raising awareness** about the importance of early childhood success;
- **Engaging citizens and key partners** in developing a strategic plan for action around early care and education;
- **Soliciting input** about the most pressing needs of young children and their families;
- **Developing priorities** for action to improve outcomes for young children;
- **Highlighting existing early childhood programs and services** and celebrating successes;
- **Building momentum** for upcoming efforts to address the needs of young children in the community; or
- **Promoting a long-term plan on early childhood.**

Multiple goals may be identified, depending on the current events and initiatives in the community. For example, a city that is taking part in the NLC City Challenge for Early Childhood Success may wish to hold a townhall meeting to get feedback from parents and stakeholders about priorities for action or to release a strategic plan on early childhood. Other cities may want to use a mayoral summit to raise awareness or recruit community partners to form an early childhood coalition.

Step 2: Choose a format.

After determining a set of desired outcomes, choose a format for the event that will best help meet those goals. There are many different convening options for a community forum on early childhood. For example, if getting input from the public about key issues facing young children and their families is a priority, a townhall meeting may be an appropriate format. Or, if your city is focusing on engaging key community leaders and laying the groundwork for future action, a mayor's summit can provide in-depth feedback and may lead to the designation of an early childhood task force. These two basic format ideas are described in more detail below.

Townhall Meeting on Early Childhood

A townhall meeting on early childhood is most often an event that informs the public, generates community dialogue, and builds support for early care and education programs and services. It is usually open to anyone in the community that is interested in issues affecting young children and therefore has the potential to be a large event. Key elements of a townhall meeting include an opportunity for participants to hear from city officials such as council members or the mayor, as well as an open floor session where citizens can voice their opinions on early childhood issues.

A townhall meeting can focus primarily on educating the public about the importance of the first years of life or it can help to prioritize next steps for action. It can be the first step in identifying and engaging local stakeholders for a long-term early childhood initiative or it can celebrate progress that has already been made in the community.

An alternate, scaled-down version, such as a neighborhood (or council district) forum, could involve a more limited number of people, focus on a specific area of town, or be held in the evening for only a few hours.

Mayor's Summit

A mayor's (or councilmember's) summit is typically an invitational meeting held with key stakeholders in the community – such as city department heads, top school officials, early childhood experts, directors of community-based organizations working on children's issues, and business leaders. Key elements of a mayoral summit usually include a roundtable discussion of critical issues facing families in the community and feedback to the city about new ideas and opportunities for community-wide partnerships on behalf of young children. This format can also help engage local leaders in a newly formed early childhood task force or coalition, or celebrate the progress of such a group and generate momentum for the next phase of work. It is usually a smaller gathering than a townhall meeting, making it a good option for larger cities where an open and potentially very large gathering is more difficult to coordinate.

City Example: Tulsa, Oklahoma

Last fall, in partnership with Tulsa's leading civic and non-profit organizations, Mayor Bill LaFortune hosted the "Tulsa Community Conference on Early Childhood Development." This conference brought together over 250 participants from community and faith groups, civic and non-profit organizations, as well as parents, early childhood professionals, and public officials.

The gathering served as an opportunity to celebrate the progress the community has made and to re-commit to the goal of improving outcomes for young children in Tulsa. One of the key results of the day was the establishment of the Tulsa Partnership for Early Childhood Success.

For more information about the Tulsa Community Conference on Early Childhood Development, see the Community Services Council of Greater Tulsa's website:

<http://www.csctulsa.org/early%20childhood.htm>

A mayor's summit can range from a two-hour leadership breakfast to a full-day strategy session. A breakfast meeting could be an opportunity to engage important early childhood development leaders in an informal dialogue about the challenges facing young children in the city. At a more intensive working meeting, experts from the field could offer in-depth ideas and suggestions about areas that need to be addressed or develop specific early childhood initiatives. A mayor can also use the event to initiate or reflect on a citywide early childhood needs and resources assessment or develop a strategic plan for the community.

Step 3: Decide on a target audience.

Deciding whom to invite to an event will depend on the type of convening being organized. Usually, a townhall meeting is open to the general public, but special effort should be made to reach out to a diverse group of representatives from key community groups, parent or neighborhood associations, and other stakeholders concerned with early childhood issues. A mayor's summit typically involves a more limited number of participants, often representing the leadership of important constituent groups. For example, invitees to a mayor's summit are often executive directors of non-profit organizations, heads of public agencies, the superintendent of schools, or local business leaders.

Any type of early childhood community forum should seek to include representatives from the following broad groups. For each group, a variety of examples of people in this category are offered. Special effort should be made to ensure that participants represent the full diversity of the city or target neighborhood. The broad groups are:

- **Relevant city officials/staff** – city councilmembers, heads of city agencies, city employees working on child and family issues;
- **Families** – PTA or other parent associations, parents with young children, grandparents who care for their grandchildren;
- **Early childhood professionals** – caregivers, teachers and/or administrators from child care, preschool, and Head Start programs;
- **School leaders** – superintendent, school board members, principals, K-12 teachers;
- **Health care professionals** – hospital administrators, doctors, nurses, public health workers;
- **Social services professionals** – social workers, child abuse and neglect prevention specialists;
- **Business leaders** – Chamber of Commerce, corporate leaders, small business owners;
- **Non-profit groups** – United Way, child care resource and referral agencies (CCR&R), YMCA/YWCA, NAACP, Urban League;
- **Faith-based groups** – leaders or congregational groups from local churches, synagogues, or mosques; faith-based nonprofits, such as Catholic Charities;
- **Volunteer groups** – Volunteers of America, Kiwanis, Big Brothers/Big Sisters, Junior League;
- **Local philanthropic groups** – community foundations; and
- **Public safety professionals** – police and fire chiefs, judges, law enforcement officers.

Step 4: Develop an agenda.

A townhall meeting or mayor's summit on early childhood can be a full-day, half-day, morning, or evening event. Design an agenda that fits the format or style of the event, the goals identified, and most importantly, the unique characteristics of your community and the proposed participants. For example, in some communities, a panel of experts discussing early childhood development and practices may be a good way to educate the public about the needs of young children. In others, it might be more appropriate to open the floor to audience members so that they can talk freely and share their concerns. In any case, developing an agenda should be done early on in the process so that potential speakers or facilitators can be identified and invited.

To provide ideas for a range of convenings, sample agendas are included at the back of this document for a half-day townhall meeting, an evening neighborhood forum, a full-day mayor's summit, and a two-hour leadership breakfast. We encourage you to tailor these – or create your own unique agenda – to best fit the needs of your individual community.

City Example: Nashville, Tennessee

The 2003 Mayor's Summit on Children and Youth took place at the Nashville Convention Center over the course of three days, with each session having a unique emphasis. One day of the Summit focused on early childhood, with panels on children's health, kindergarten readiness, and increasing the quality and availability of early care.

At the concluding session, Mayor Bill Purcell announced priorities for the city's future work on early childhood, including:

- immunizing all children by the age of two;
- developing a citywide kindergarten readiness campaign;
- creating community pre-kindergarten standards;
- extending the Mayor's First Day Festival to include Head Start and other early childhood programs;
- expanding the Public Library's literacy outreach programs for child care centers;
- creating child friendly spaces in homeless shelters serving children; and
- making the Metropolitan Government a leader in employer-sponsored child care.

For more information see:

http://www.nashville.gov/moc/Summit/early_childhood.htm

Step 5: Forge strategic partnerships.

In many cities and towns, hosting a large event such as a townhall meeting or summit on early childhood will require the assistance of other organizations and stakeholders in the community. Existing early childhood coalitions or groups (e.g., a United Way Success By Six coalition or an early education practitioners group) are logical partners to consider. In addition, working together with other key groups and individuals to organize an event is also a good opportunity to develop relationships that will be important for future collaboration on early childhood issues.

Engaging community partners from the beginning – in developing the format, designing the agenda, and brainstorming speakers or invitees – can secure important buy-in for the event and ensure its success. Community partners can also offer support in promoting the event and help with implementation. For example, local television, radio, or print media partners can donate free airtime or ad space in a newspaper for advertisements about the event. Or, a local non-profit or service group could provide staff for registration and help with setting up on the day of the event.

Step 6: Take advantage of NLC technical assistance.

NLC, through its Institute for Youth, Education and Families (YEF Institute), can provide general guidance and early childhood materials to cities and towns hosting community forums on early childhood during the week of October 19-25. For example:

- YEF Institute staff can help develop an agenda or brainstorm potential speakers and invitees for an event.
- The YEF Institute has copies of the I Am Your Child Foundation's video, *Why Early Childhood Matters*, (mentioned in the attached sample agendas) and an information booklet that complements the video that can be sent to cities to use at events.
- NLC has developed a draft press release that cities can use to announce their early childhood event. (See page 12.) We can also assist in creating additional press announcements.
- NLC's Action Kit for Municipal Leaders, *Supporting Early Childhood Success*, and the 2002 Futures Report, *Our Children, Our Future: Promoting Early Childhood Success in America's Cities and Towns*, can provide background information and ideas for specific city initiatives to improve outcomes for young children. These publications can be downloaded at:
http://www.nlc.org/nlc_org/site/programs/institute_for_youth_education_and_families/

For more information or assistance, please contact:
Kirsta Millar in NLC's Institute for Youth, Education, and Families
at (202) 626-3004 or millar@nlc.org

Planning Checklist

October will be here before we know it! If your city is interested in hosting a community forum on early childhood, here are some next steps you should consider:

- Return the enclosed response form**, letting NLC know you are planning on holding an event. We will publicize your participation in *Nation's Cities Weekly* and can offer assistance.
- Organize a planning team to determine goals and an appropriate format.** This team may be made up of municipal staff and/or key partners. If your city has formed an early childhood collaboration, that group can also serve as the planning team for this event.
- Pick a date and time for the event**, (preferably) during the week of October 19-25.
- Determine food/beverage needs.** If you will be providing breakfast, lunch, or refreshments during the event, arrange for a catering service.
- Develop a budget for the event** including costs for food, printing, and materials, noting any potential in-kind contributions.
- Find a venue for the meeting**, such as a municipal building, school gymnasium, community center, local hotel ballroom, or a college/university. If you are planning to have breakout or small group discussions, make sure to secure space for those sessions.
- Develop an agenda** (see attached samples for ideas) to fit the needs of your city.
- For mayor's summits or leadership breakfasts, send invitations** to key community stakeholders and special guests as soon as the date and place are secure.
- For townhall meetings or neighborhood forums, begin advertising the event** to ensure a good turnout. Advertisements can be placed in grocery stores, libraries, parks, community centers, schools, and any other place that families and the target audience frequent. Other outreach could be done through churches, synagogues, mosques, neighborhood newsletters, and the city website.

Four Sample Agendas

1. Townhall Meeting on Early Childhood

This agenda is based on a half-day day event (approximately 4 hours).

- **Opening/Welcome:** This should be done by the mayor or other local elected official to kick-off the event, welcome participants, and give an overview of the day's schedule. The speaker should discuss why early childhood success is important to the community and highlight why the city is taking an active role in addressing these issues.
- **Screening of Video:** The I Am Your Child Foundation has produced a 10-minute video called, *Why Early Childhood Matters*.¹ This powerful video can serve as an engaging way to begin the event. NLC has free copies of this video available for use. (See "NLC technical assistance" on page 5.)
- **Panel Presentation:** A set of presentations can offer participants the chance to learn more about early childhood development, and hear about key needs in the community and recommendations about how to address those needs. Speakers could include: a local child development expert, an early childhood practitioner, a parent, a librarian, a pediatrician, a researcher, or a business or school leader. The moderator for the session could be an elected official.
- **Question & Answer Session with Panelists:** An opportunity for audience members to ask specific questions of the panelists may begin to engage participants.
- **Open Floor:** Time for general comments, suggestions, and questions from participants may be the most important part of the event, offering local officials the opportunity to hear citizens' thoughts on the most pressing needs for young children in the community.

OR:

- **Small Group Sessions:** Depending on the space and size of the audience, it may be helpful to offer time for participants to break out into smaller groups for discussions about early childhood needs in the community. A list of discussion questions adapted from NLC's Community Assessment Tool can be a starting point. (See page 11.) A facilitator assigned to each group can help identify key issues raised in the conversation and report them back to larger group.
- **Wrap-Up/Next Steps:** It is important to end the event with some concrete next steps. For example, a call could be made for volunteers to form an early childhood coalition to study the needs of young children and develop priorities for action. Or, the city can announce a set of initiatives or ideas it will pursue. Even if the city is not ready to commit to a specific course of action, a local official could pledge to commission a report or form a task force to move the process forward.

¹I Am Your Child's video, *Why Early Childhood Matters*, features national leaders in government, business, crime prevention, and academia voicing their commitment to our nation's youngest children and emphasizing the need for increased investment in early childhood. The video is designed to motivate communities to support programs that ensure that every child enters school ready to succeed.

2. Mayor's Summit On Early Childhood

This agenda is based on a full-day summit (approximately 6-7 hours).

- **Welcome/Opening:** The mayor should welcome participants, and give an overview of the day's schedule. He/she should discuss why early childhood success is important to the community and highlight why the city is taking an active role in addressing these issues.
- **Review of Community Need and Resources:** A review and discussion of the city's early childhood needs and resources will set the foundation for identifying goals and priorities later in the day. If a community assessment has already been completed, this can serve as the basis for discussion. (*Note: copies of a community assessment tool are available from NLC.*) If not, community representatives or a city staff member could present other findings (e.g., data from Kids Count, an area university, or the local United Way) or general perceptions about key areas important to young children, such as health and safety, child care and early learning, and parent/family support. Stakeholders can then offer reactions, discuss pressing needs, and make recommendations for how to address those concerns.
- **Lunch Break:** During the lunch break, the I Am Your Child video, *Why Early Childhood Matters* can be shown.² A keynote address by a local child development expert, local leader, or prominent citizen is also appropriate.
- **Develop Goals/Priorities:** This is the “working” part of the meeting. Participants can break out into smaller discussion groups based on issue areas (e.g., health and safety, early learning and child care, supporting parents) to begin to draft goals and priorities for the city's strategic plan on early childhood. A facilitator can help with this process. Individual groups can share their suggestions with the entire group and get feedback from one another.
- **Wrap Up/Next Steps:** It is important to end the event with some concrete next steps. For example, the group could decide to form a task force on early childhood. Alternately, the mayor could appoint a staff person to prepare a report from the summit that could be used as the basis for an early childhood strategic plan.
- **Press Event:** At the end of the day, the mayor could hold a press conference to announce the formation of an early childhood coalition or other specific initiatives and commitments that have come out of the summit.

²I Am Your Child's video, *Why Early Childhood Matters*, features national leaders in government, business, crime prevention, and academia voicing their commitment to our nation's youngest children and emphasizing the need for increased investment in early childhood. The video is designed to motivate communities to support programs that ensure that every child enters school ready to succeed.

3. Neighborhood Forum on Early Childhood

This agenda is based on an evening forum (approximately 2 hours).

- **Welcome/Opening:** The mayor/councilmember should welcome participants and give an overview of the forum schedule. He/she should discuss why early childhood success is important to the community, highlight why the city is taking an active role in addressing these issues, and ask for honest input and feedback from participants during the open floor session.
- **Question & Answer/Open Floor:** During this time for general comments, suggestions, and questions from participants, local officials can hear directly from citizens about their thoughts on the most pressing needs for young children in the community. If needed, specific questions can be posed to get the discussion started. A list of discussion questions adapted from NLC's Community Assessment Tool can be a starting point. *(See page 11.)* A facilitator could help moderate the session.
- **Wrap-Up/Next Steps:** It is important to end the forum with some concrete next steps. For example, the city could announce that it will hold a series of early childhood neighborhood forums in other parts of the city in the coming months. A local official could issue a call for volunteers to form an early childhood coalition to review the needs of young children and develop priorities for action. The city might announce a set of initiatives or ideas it will pursue or pledge to commission a report or form a task force to move the process forward.

4. Leadership Breakfast

This agenda is based on a breakfast summit (approximately 2-3 hours).

- **Welcome/Opening:** The mayor/councilmember should welcome participants and give an overview of the schedule. He/she should discuss why early childhood success is important to the community and highlight why the city is taking an active role in addressing these issues.
- **Recognition of Early Childhood Champions:** The mayor or councilmember can recognize one or two key leaders for the work they are doing around early childhood development, and/or showcase local early care and education programs that are providing exceptionally high quality care.
- **Roundtable Discussion:** The host (or an outside facilitator) should lead an open-ended discussion about the pressing needs for young children, initiatives in the community that are (or are not) working, and recommendations for how to address concerns. Opinions about priority areas can also be solicited. This discussion can be organized as a review of a completed community assessment or specific, targeted questions can be posed.
- **Wrap Up/Next Steps:** It is important to end the breakfast with some concrete next steps. For example, the group could decide to form a task force on early childhood. Alternately, the mayor could appoint a staff person to prepare a summary of the input given at the meeting that could be used as the basis for an early childhood strategic plan.

Discussion Questions

These questions, adapted from NLC's *Early Childhood Needs and Resources Community Assessment Tool*, may be useful when organizing discussions with parents, community members, and other stakeholders involved in a townhall meeting or mayor's summit.

For use at a Townhall Meeting/Neighborhood Forum:

- What do you think are the most pressing issues (e.g., lack of child care, access to health care, etc.) facing young children and their families in the community? If you had to prioritize, what issue would be the highest on your list?
- What do you think is the hardest part of raising a child in this city/town?
- What programs or services in the city/town are the most helpful to families raising young children?
- How do parents and community members find out about available resources/services for young children (e.g., word of mouth, family resource center, etc.)?
- If you could make one suggestion to help make the system work better to support families of young children, what would it be?

For use at a Mayor's Summit/Leadership Breakfast:

- What are the biggest unmet needs for young children and families? What is the evidence of this? OR: If reviewing a completed community assessment – What does the data and information collected as part of the early childhood assessment tell us about the condition of young children in our city? What additional information or data would be helpful to collect?
- What services do each of you offer? Do all of these services function as a cohesive system? If not, why?
- What are some key ways to promote communication and coordination among providers of early care and education, health services, and parent support programs in the city/town?
- What are some potential challenges to developing a long-term strategic plan on early childhood for the city? How can they be overcome?
- What roles could the city/town play in order to improve outcomes for young children?
- If you could make one suggestion to help make the system work better to support families of young children, what would it be?

Sample Press Release

For Immediate Release
(Date)

For Information Contact:
(Name/phone # of press contact)
(Second name/phone # for press contact)

(Your Local Official) Will Host (Your Event) on Early Childhood Success As Part of National “Little Kids, Big Plans” Week

[City, date] ————— Recognizing that early childhood experiences strongly influence success in school and adulthood, **(your local official's name)** of **(your city)** will host **(insert your planned event here; e.g., a townhall meeting, community forum, mayor's summit)** focused on early childhood on **[date of your event]**.

“The success of our youngest citizens has a fundamental impact on the vitality of our city, now and into the future,” **(local official's name)** said.

The “Little Kids, Big Plans” event is part of a series of activities that will occur throughout the week of October 19, 2003 as part of the National League of Cities’ (NLC) Campaign for Early Childhood Success. Cities and towns across the country have planned events for this week as part of their commitment to promoting the healthy development of young children.

(Insert details of local event and any other local interest stories here)

(Your local official's name) went on to say, “Our involvement in this event offers the opportunity to raise awareness, celebrate existing programs, and redouble our efforts to improve early childhood outcomes in our community. The City of **(your city's name)** is proud to be part of this nationwide effort to ensure a brighter future for our youngest citizens.”

For more information on NLC’s Campaign for Early Childhood Success, contact Kirsta Millar in NLC’s Institute for Youth, Education, and Families at 202/626-3004 (phone), 202/626-3043 (fax), or millar@nlc.org.

The National League of Cities is the oldest and largest national organization for American cities. NLC serves as a resource and advocate for 18,000 cities, towns, and villages of all sizes, from New York City to Bee Cave, Texas, which collectively serve 225 million people. Visit www.nlc.org.