

Planning (2)

How to decide on activities

From The CLEAR GUIDE v1, written by Les Robinson for Mission Australia March 2009

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Once the group has decided on its purpose, it will probably want to get busy with some activities. It might want to start a play group, invite guest speakers, run parenting classes, organise social events or advocate for better services.

Although the members will be enthusiastic to get started, it's vital to spend some time thinking clearly about the choice and shape of those activities. Putting aside one or two meetings to plan activities is a good idea because it allows all members to have input and encourages more thoughtful decisions. Time spent planning at this stage is always time well spent.

Planning sessions should be facilitated, which means that someone takes responsibility for planning and facilitating the process to be followed. The facilitator can either be a capable parent or a community worker. The important thing is that they have the consent of the group to act as facilitator and ensure that good facilitation practice is followed. Most importantly, the facilitator should avoid having input into the content of the plan - their role is just to look after the process that's being followed.

An easy planning process

Here is a simple process to follow when planning activities.

You'll need a facilitator, a scribe, a supply of flipchart paper (or a whiteboard), and some marker pens.

Note: ALWAYS use large sheets of flip chart paper or a whiteboard and marker pens when planning, and make sure everyone can easily see them. Unless all members of the group can see their plan being created on one sheet, they will have trouble participating and may end up not agreeing that it's *their* plan.

Before you start, do some research

Often people will jump to conventional quick fixes and miss the chance to try interesting, innovative and effective ideas. For instance, if they are working on improving child health, they may

want free transport to the health clinic, when improving diets might be a better answer.

Getting informed and inspired about the lessons others have learnt is an essential first step in planning. Often problems can seem unsolvable until we hear about a great new idea from outside our usual circle.

So, before the session find out about successful activities that other groups have done. Use Google, ask knowledgeable community workers, or ask council's community development staff.

Here are some examples of parents' group activities:

- start a play group
- start a kids singing or reading group
- start an parents' exercise group
- start a social group
- start a parenting discussion group and your own mini-library
- organise a parents' café club
- have a welcoming party for new residents
- invite an maternity nurse to give parenting classes
- organise a community event or celebration
- lobby your council or MPs for better services

For more community activity ideas, see:

Peter Kenyon's **128 Projects that Build Social Capital**

[www.bankofideas.com.au/Downloads/Social Capital Handout 2.pdf](http://www.bankofideas.com.au/Downloads/Social_Capital_Handout_2.pdf)

and his **124 Great Special Event Ideas**

[www.bankofideas.com.au/Downloads/Social Capital Handout 3.pdf](http://www.bankofideas.com.au/Downloads/Social_Capital_Handout_3.pdf)

At the session:

First: Give everyone the list of activity ideas and spent some time (say 20-30 minutes) discussing them. Even better, have an experienced community worker or interesting guest speaker come and share their ideas with you as well.

Then, follow this process:

- 1) Agree on who the facilitator and scribe will be.
- 2) Write down the group's purpose, clearly, so all can see it.

3) Have a brainstorm (see *Planning Tools*) to answer this question:

If that is our purpose, what activities would make a difference to achieving it?

List *all* the suggested activities, with minimal discussion.

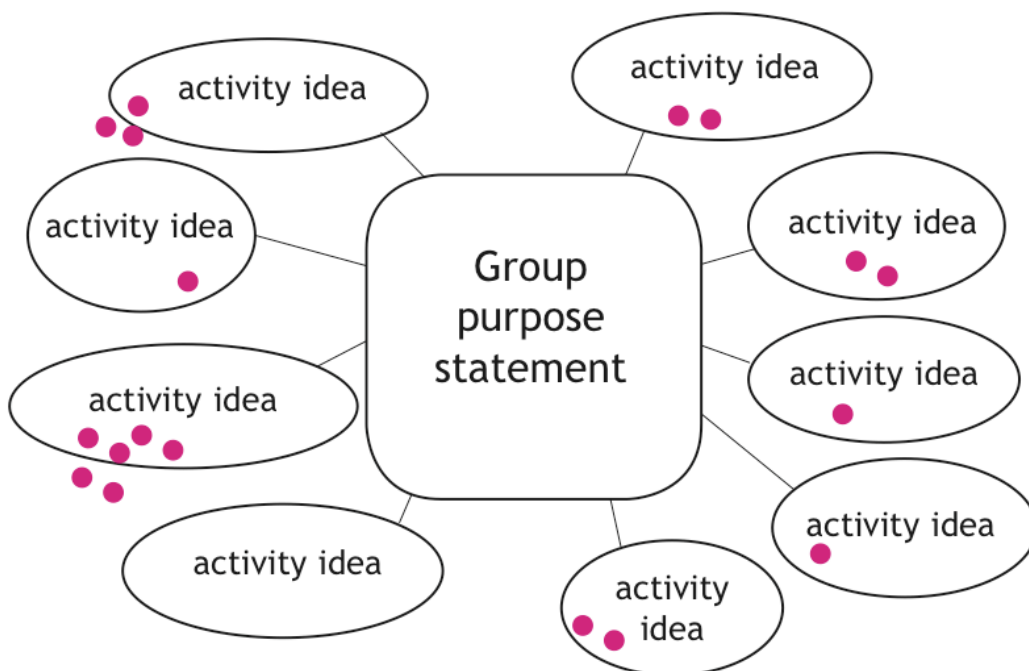
Facilitator: Reflect every idea back to the group to ensure they all understand each idea that's being written down.

4) Give each person 10 points, and ask them to 'spend' those points on the activities they think are (1) achievable; and (2) would make the biggest difference in achieving the purpose. There should be little discussion at this stage.

To 'spend' their points, participants can simply use a marker pen to put dots next to their preferred activities (see example).

5) Add up the points, and it will usually be pretty clear what activity or activities the group sees as having priority. If the group can't reach consensus, you may have to suggest a compromise, perhaps doing the simplest, easiest activity first and the more challenging activity later.

Here's how your sheet could look like. The activity with the most dots has priority.



Depending on the amount of discussion, this process should take no more than 30-40 minutes.

A more structured way to do this is with a 'Bang for Buck' Matrix (See *Planning Tools*). The Bang for Buck Matrix takes a little longer but it gives better results because the participants have chance to discuss their choices in depth.

Tricky problems

If your group wants to tackle a difficult social problem that doesn't have a simple, obvious solution, like isolation of certain families, entrenched substance abuse or welfare dependency, then the inspiration phase is absolutely vital. You should search around the world for examples of successful solutions (Google is great for this), present them to the group, and discuss the pros and cons. Even better, invite guest speakers or experts who know a lot about solutions or who have already run successful activities themselves.

Sometimes tricky issues need a lot of talk time to create understanding. Sometimes art can provide an opportunity to discuss issues more deeply. In Western Sydney one group used a community artist to map and draw aspects of the community. Participants were invited too stay after a regular community lunch to work with the artist, deepening their understanding.ⁱ

A technique called PhotoVoice can also help. Simply ask members to go around and photograph the good and bad aspects of their lives or their neighbourhoods. At the next meeting, ask them to use the photos to illustrate personal stories about the issue the group is working on. (Hint: don't spend too much time on the bad stories; the solutions are always in the positive stories).

Remember that the output from a planning session is only as good as the inputs, so the inspiration phase is absolutely vital (as well as being fascinating and empowering).

The power of positive thinking

In the early stages of planning it's a good idea for all participants to wear a "white hat", in other words: to be welcoming, positive and optimistic about all ideas that are offered, even seemingly eccentric ones. If you put on a "black hat" and start being critical of ideas at this stage then you often block *all* creative thinking, as people hold back good ideas for fear of having them criticised.

As facilitator, you can encourage “white-hat” thinking by suggesting ground rules like “Positive contributions only”, or “No idea is wrong”.

Once you’ve got all the ideas down, then it’s OK to start asking questions about cost, timing, feasibility and resources. Once again, these discussions should not be about demolishing ideas, but rather aim to create a realistic assessment of what it would take to achieve them. Use open questions like “How much would it cost?” or “How many people would it need?”

ⁱ Promising Practice Profiles, *Animation Project*, p2
www.aifs.gov.au/cafca/topics/alpha.html