

## Guide to Empathy Interviews

### INTRODUCTION TO EMPATHY INTERVIEWS

#### What is an Empathy Interview?

- An interview that uses a human-centered approach to understand the feelings and experiences of others. Rather than feeling like a formal interview with a long list of questions, an empathy interview should feel more like an open conversation with a friend.
  - Typically consists of one participant with a pair of interviewers: one to guide the discussion and one to take detailed notes. If there is only one interviewer, then it is recommended to voice record the conversation.

#### Why Conduct an Empathy Interview?

- To gain a deeper understanding of a participant's experience
  - Use observations and insights to inform future decisions and initiatives.

### HOW TO CONDUCT AN EMPATHY INTERVIEW: SAMPLE SCHEDULE

#### Breakdown of total time estimated

<i>Plan:</i>	1.5 hours
<i>Do (Conduct Interview):</i>	30 minutes
<i>Study (Debrief):</i>	30 minutes
<i>Act (Follow Up):</i>	Case by case basis
<i>Total Time:</i>	~ Half a school day

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### PLAN

#### Initial Planning Day (One Hour, Week 1)

- With your team, decide on a learning goal for the empathy interview. This will inform which participants you reach out to and the questions you develop for your protocol.
    - **Example:** Family experiences: I want to better understand the experience of the families of students who are English Learners.
  - Determine when and where you will host the empathy interview
    - Plan 30 minutes for the day of the empathy interview: 15-20 minutes for the interview and 10 minutes for a debrief after the interview with just the interviewer and the notetaker.
    - Choose a location that is comfortable and easily accessible.
  - Identify potential participants and send invitations
    - Given your learning goal, determine who falls into the population you are targeting.
    - Include the following in your invitation:
      - Purpose for conducting an empathy interview
      - Why their participation would be valuable
      - Date and time
      - An incentive, such as coffee and/or a gift card
  - Select interviewer and notetaker and send invitations, as needed
    - Interviewer should have knowledge on the topic and feel comfortable leading an empathy interview.
      - **Example:** The interviewer should be able to actively listen and host a conversation that encourages storytelling from participants.
    - Notetaker is encouraged to take detailed notes, keep track of time, and handle recording equipment.
- 💡 **Tip:** Asking staff which parents would be helpful to interview given your learning goals for the experience can help connect you to parents you might not have reached out to otherwise.
- 💡 **Tip:** Recruit non-traditional parent leaders for your empathy interview. This is a good way to get more parents engaged with school initiatives, and they are likely to offer new perspectives and insights.
- 💡 **Tip:** Be thoughtful about the power dynamics that can exist during the empathy interview. Remember that the goal is to create a safe and open environment for participants.

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### Follow-Up Planning Day (30 minutes, Week 1)

- Follow-up with potential participants, interviewer, and notetaker to answer any questions or to reach out to additional people if necessary.
  - Consider what supplies you will need and make sure your calendar is cleared to be able to fully participate during the empathy interview.
  - Develop your protocol which will include:
    - Introductions
      - How you will introduce yourself and the purpose of the empathy interview
    - Questions
      - Plan to ask 3-5 open-ended questions, but be open to pursuing topics that emerge throughout the interview
      - Keep questions concise to ensure participants understand and remember what is asked. Remember, simple questions do not yield simple answers
      - Avoid yes or no questions
        - **Example:** Do you like your child's school?
      - Encourage storytelling from participants by asking questions that take the following format: "Tell me about a time when..."
      - Avoid leading questions by keeping questions open-ended. This allows participants to determine the direction of the response and share what is on their mind, as opposed to sharing what they believe the facilitator is implying
        - **Example:** "How much do you like your child's school?" (leading) vs. "Share with us your experience at your child's school." (open-ended)
      - Incorporate follow-up questions, as needed, to build on a topic or to get a more specific response
        - **Example:** What are the needs within our community? THEN Which of these is the most important?
    - Probes you might want to use when you want to hear from more participants or get clarification on a response
      - **Example:** "Tell me more about..." "Can you say more about..." "What experiences have you had that make you feel that way?"
- **Tip:** When creating your guidelines, consider the type of environment you want to create for participants (i.e. I don't want this to feel like a formal conversation) and what you can do to cultivate this environment
- **Tip:** Take advantage of the interview format by ensuring you ask questions that can't be easily asked or answered on a written survey. The fewer the questions, the better.

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### DO

#### Day of Empathy Interview (30 minutes, Week 2)

- Begin the empathy interview (5 minutes)
  - Introduce yourself, thank your participant for their time, and reiterate the purpose of the empathy interview. Build rapport with your participant before diving into your questions.
- Ask questions (15 minutes)
  - Facilitator should:
    - Ask prepared questions and encourage storytelling from participants
    - Actively listen and pick up on cues that allow the interview to take different directions, if necessary, to explore topics/emotions that come up.
  - Notetaker should:
    - Take detailed notes of what participants say and any observations, such as verbal or physical cues
    - Monitor time
    - Co-facilitate as necessary
    - Set up recording equipment if necessary
- Debrief (10 minutes)
  - The facilitator and notetaker should debrief after the empathy interview. This includes reviewing notes, filling in any details that were not captured in the notes, and discussing areas that seemed particularly important or salient. Even though you will have a larger, more formal debrief on another day, it is important to still immediately debrief while your memory is fresh.

💡 **Tip:** It is helpful to probe early in the discussion to underscore the impression that more detailed answers are needed and wanted.

💡 **Tip:** Embrace silence. Allowing silence can encourage participation because it gives participants a chance to think about what they want to say. More often than not, participants will fill the silence with more information.

💡 **Tip:** Refrain from showing your opinion on a topic or response. Comments such as “I can’t believe it!” or “You really think that?!” infer your opinion and impose judgment on the participant, which can shut down discussion. Instead, use phrases such as “Thank you for sharing.”

💡 **Tip:** Also record your debrief if you do not have as much energy to take detailed notes of your reflections after the focus group.

💡 **Tip:** More tips on how to effectively facilitate an empathy interview can be found in the sources listed on page 1.



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### STUDY

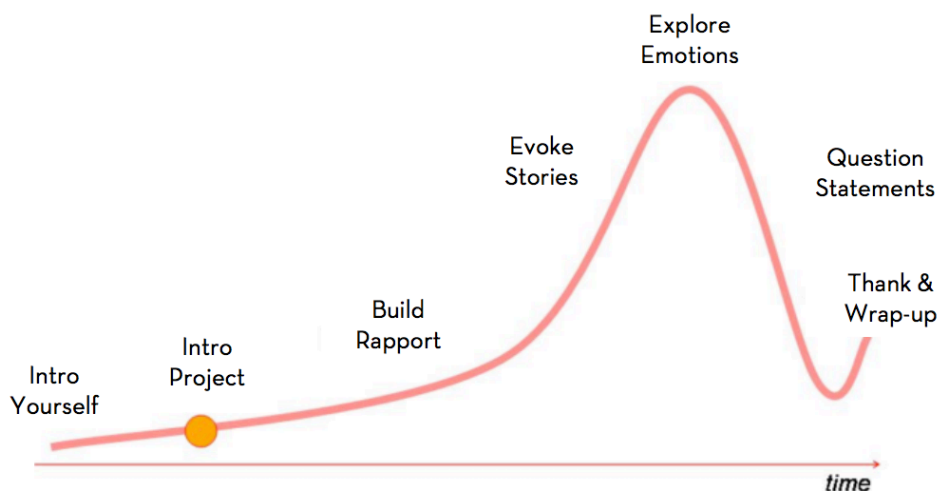
#### Debrief Day (30 minutes, Week 2)

- Identify the most interesting thoughts and observations from the experience, and how they will inform future decisions and initiatives.
  - Decide how and when you will share reflections with students, staff, and families. Send out emails or handwritten notes to thank participants for the experience and details on when the follow up will take place.
- 💡 **Tip:** Consider the following questions to help you debrief: What are common themes that came up? What can we learn from what was said? From what wasn't said? How can we incorporate ideas from this empathy interview into our equity work?

### ACT

#### Follow Up (Case by case basis)

- Share reflections with students, staff, and families, including the short-term and long-term action plans that you and your team would like to implement after conducting empathy interviews.
  - Implement at least one small change that is influenced by your experience soon after Debrief Day. Even though this change might not be long-term or fully address the issue, it builds credibility among students, staff, and families and allows you to gain more insight on the issue you are trying to address.
- 💡 **Tip:** Continue the relationship with the participants involved. If they have now become more interested in your efforts and would like to get more involved, consider offering them an opportunity to do so.



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#### SOURCES AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- **How to Conduct an Empathy Interview**
  - <https://www.zionandzion.com/how-to-conduct-empathy-interviews/>
- **Quick tips for Conducting an Empathy Interview | Graphic Included**
  - <https://dschool-old.stanford.edu/wp-content/themes/dschool/method-cards/interview-for-empathy.pdf>