

SI Facilitation Tool – Essential Question

Ask the Essential Question





SI Essential Question

A big question to inspire thinking, guide decision-making, and keep the focus on what matters most.

How can our
[practices/programs/policies] help to
encourage, enrich, and empower human
relationships around children, families,
and their helpers?

The background features a light orange gradient. On the left side, there are two stylized human profiles. The upper profile is a solid orange shape with a white circular cutout for an eye. The lower profile is a white shape with an orange outline and a solid orange dot for an eye.

SI Essential Question

A big question to inspire thinking, guide decision-making, and keep the focus on what matters most.

This is a prompt that usually comes into an SI session (or a series of SI sessions) towards the end, after we have already grounded everyone in conversation, observation, and reflection about simple and everyday interactions. Without that grounding, any discussion about this prompt might get abstract, high-level, and structural very quickly and lose its anchor in the human, relational experiences of people. (Although we would be very interested in anyone trying it differently! Perhaps in some relationally-ready communities, this can be the leading and focusing question from the start.)

In our experience, this has been a clarifying question for people in many different roles - from frontline practitioners, to program leaders, all the way to policymakers and funders. The question itself may be much more helpful than any answers one may solicit within the limited duration of a session. Sometimes people follow up months or years later, sharing, "I still have that question written down." That is very much the intent because this is a question that is worth asking in perpetuity.

Sample Facilitator Language

Here is some sample language we use to introduce the essential question. We hope you find authentic and natural ways to adapt this question to your work.

“Where do we go from here? Well, one concrete and specific thing we can do is to make sure we, or someone, is always asking this question at every meeting or conversation that has to do with our work. It doesn’t matter what the topic is – recruitment, quality improvement, program design, research, or even financing and budget – just ask how the things we are discussing and deciding might ultimately matter to the interactions and relationships on the ground.

If human relationships are truly *the* active ingredients – not just important elements, but the active ingredients – of our work, then everything we do has to somehow tie back to this question.

How do our ... (you fill in the blank!) ... help to encourage, enrich, and empower the human relationships around children, around their families, and around all the helping professionals who support them?”





Sample Practices/Programs/Policies

Here are some examples of practices, programs, and policies that might help to encourage, enrich, and empower human relationships. Keep in mind that the question itself is a tool for participants to walk away with, even more so than any specific answer in the moment.

- **Practice:** From preschools and Head Start programs, it's been really helpful to rotate staff who do morning drop-offs and afternoon pick-ups. The staff get to know the parents/caregivers who come by, and they get to check in with the families. Parents/caregivers have an informal opportunity to ask questions or share something about their lives, which the teachers can bring into the classroom. It helps to build a kind of parent-staff relationship that goes beyond and extends the more formal open-house or parent-teacher meetings.
- **Program:** A hospital "child life" team creates a program that actively invites and engages siblings of young patients in the play activities, establishing program norms that not only keep child patients at the center, but recognize that siblings are both part of the young patient's close-knit relational ecosystem, but at the same time have social, psychological, and developmental needs associated with the uncertainties of hospitalization and health challenges.
- **Policy:** From a state agency or state-wide professional development intermediary – to support the professionalization of early care professionals, it helps to re-examine professional development pathways and credentialing policies, giving credit to work history and competencies for providers, rather than solely relying on academic degrees. This honors the experience that derives from day-to-day relational care.

SI Practitioners' Notes

Junlei's notes on lessons learned from facilitating the essential question.

The question once upon a time was phrased as "Does our practice/program/policy ...?" A participant wisely counseled us during a workshop, "Don't you think it can be 'how does' ... because it is not meant as a yes/no evaluation, right? It's meant as an open-ended discussion about the ways we are doing something. Sometimes a policy or a program does not automatically help relationships. It's how we do it, how we implement it, that makes the difference. There's a lot more to talk about in the 'how' than the yes/no question." That was brilliant, wasn't it?

In communities that feel ready for honest, direct, and productive discussions, participants have encouraged us to facilitate specific discussions about challenges and barriers. The complementary question becomes:

How might our existing [practices/programs/policies] discourage, diminish, and/or disempower the human relationships around children, families, and their helpers?

That's a powerful question. It'll take a lot of reflection to get through that. We don't recommend using that question all by itself, because it descends into an overwhelming amount of problem-naming. But when that question is used alongside the original, we might be able to recognize our strengths and understand our barriers at the same time. That is the richness of relational thinking.



SI Practitioners' Notes

Emily's notes on lessons learned from facilitating the essential question.

This question is the lens through which I make sense of just about everything – from youth mental health to workforce development to early childhood education to AI (e.g., “How does AI/technology ...”), this question is both clarifying for decision-making and inspiring as a call to action. That is why I often end an SI workshop or presentation on the essential question. If people walk away with one idea, I hope it’s this one.

Paired with an understanding of how relationships are not just important but *the* active ingredient in human development, reflecting on this question is affirming of simple, everyday interactions, and it also becomes a tool to advocate for the elimination of barriers to building and strengthening human relationships.

I’ll never forget when a workshop organizer emailed me after a workshop, “I caught two participants still in the parking lot when I left talking to one another...it was a lead teacher talking to the director. She had the courage to tell her supervisor that she feels bogged down with the day-to-day lesson plans and wants to incorporate more one-on-one quality time with her students. This is a preschool-only center, and her director pushed back a little. But as I was loading up my car, I heard her finally come around to incorporating a more relational approach to their preschool time, even if that meant adding 20-30 more minutes of class to each session.” These are the kinds of conversations and shared problem-solving sessions that we hope the essential question will inspire!

