

Empathy Interviews: A Guide for UCS Programs

UCS Family Engagement Toolkit

Designed For

Program leads and Special Olympics liaisons.

Time Estimate

2-3 hours to plan and prepare for interviews;
time to conduct and analyze interviews will
depend on the number of interviews.



Grow and Sustain
the UCS Program

Why would I use this tool?

This tool offers a guided process for gathering feelings and stories around specific experiences. You can use this data collection technique to better design and develop equitable family engagement in UCS programming by:

- building trust and **empathy**;
- gathering feedback and ideas; and
- identifying issues and generating potential solutions.

“Empathy means trying to understand deeply the experiences and feelings of other people. It is both a mindset to embrace and a skill to practice.”¹⁸

¹⁸ Nelsestuen, and Smith (2020). Empathy interviews, p. 59. The Learning Professional.
<https://learningforward.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/tool-empathy-interviews.pdf>



When should I use this tool?

You can use empathy interviews for multiple purposes. You can use this process when you want to:

- build trust and connections with families;
- understand better the needs, concerns, or behaviors of diverse families; and
- to fill a gap in programming.

How should I use this tool?

To use this tool, you can:

- watch the short video on empathy interview norms;
- review the 6-step process to plan, conduct, and process information;
- use the checklist and template plan;
- conduct interviews; and
- analyze interviews, share findings with others, and determine how or if findings inform program improvement.



Empathy Interviews: A Guide for UCS Programs

Empathy interviews are a technique both to connect with families and to gather information that can be used to support program improvement activities. With empathy interviews, you are gathering information on a family's lived experience by listening to them share their experience with UCS.

What you learn from conversations with diverse families can help you better value and understand them. What you learn can also help you identify gaps or needs in UCS programming and work toward family engagement approaches that are inclusive, accessible, and successful.

Empathy Interviews Overview and Norms

Empathy interviews are:

- designed to build empathy with students and families toward an equitable family engagement approach.
- a strategy to understand unacknowledged student and family needs.
- usually brief one-on-one conversations.
- conducted with humility and respect.

Empathy interviews are not:

- intended to be used as a research method.
- representative of all families in your community.
- typically group interviews.
- a lengthy interview or process.



Empathy Interview Norms Video [4:08min]

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=71UuDC39kHQ>

The 6-step approach illustrated in **Figure 5** provides guidance on the empathy interview process. Each description below includes tips and considerations for meeting the needs of different contexts.

Figure 5. 6-Step Approach to Empathy Interviews





1

CLEARLY
DEFINE THE
PROBLEM

Step 1. What do you want to learn and why?

Decide on your purpose for an empathy interview and what sort of information would be useful to you. Are you looking for ways to improve or change family engagement? Do you want to understand the root cause of challenges to family engagement? Do you want to explore a particular issue? Or, something else?

Create 1-3 open-ended questions that allow families to express diverse experiences with the topic. Empathy interviews are focused and typically have no more than 3 questions.

Questions may include probes—or follow-up questions—to make sure you get a full understanding of families' lived experience with the topic. Sample question stems and prompts could be:¹⁹

- **Can you tell me about** your experience with getting medical clearance for your daughter so she could participate in [insert sport/activity]?

Probe(s):

- Tell me more about ...
- How did you feel about that?

- **Can you describe the circumstances around** a UCS event or activity you really wanted to attend.

Probe(s):

- Why was that?

- **Tell me about a time** you couldn't make it to a UCS event or activity.

Probe(s):

- What happened?
- What were you feeling?

- **What are the best / more difficult parts of** [fill in with a UCS event or other relevant event/activity]?

Probe(s):

- What were you thinking at that point?

- **What are your best/worst experiences with ...**

Probe(s):

- Tell me more ...

¹⁹ Adapted from Hasso Plattner, Institute of Design at Stanford, Empathy Fieldguide

**2****IDENTIFY
FAMILIES
TO SPEAK WITH****Step 2. Who do you need to hear from?**

Decide on whose voice you need to hear and what criteria you will use to identify families. This could be based on families from diverse communities, families of students with and/or without disabilities, current or previous UCS families, etc.

The goal is also to select families who represent a variety of perspectives. Ideally, you would include families who have very different interactions with UCS. For example:

- If your focus is UCS paperwork—a family who always submits UCS paperwork on time and a family that rarely or never submits UCS paperwork.
- If your focus is UCS participation—a family who frequently comes to UCS events and a family who rarely or never comes to UCS events.
- If your focus is volunteering for UCS—a family who always volunteers and a family who rarely or never volunteers.

Other questions to consider before selecting families for empathy interviews include:

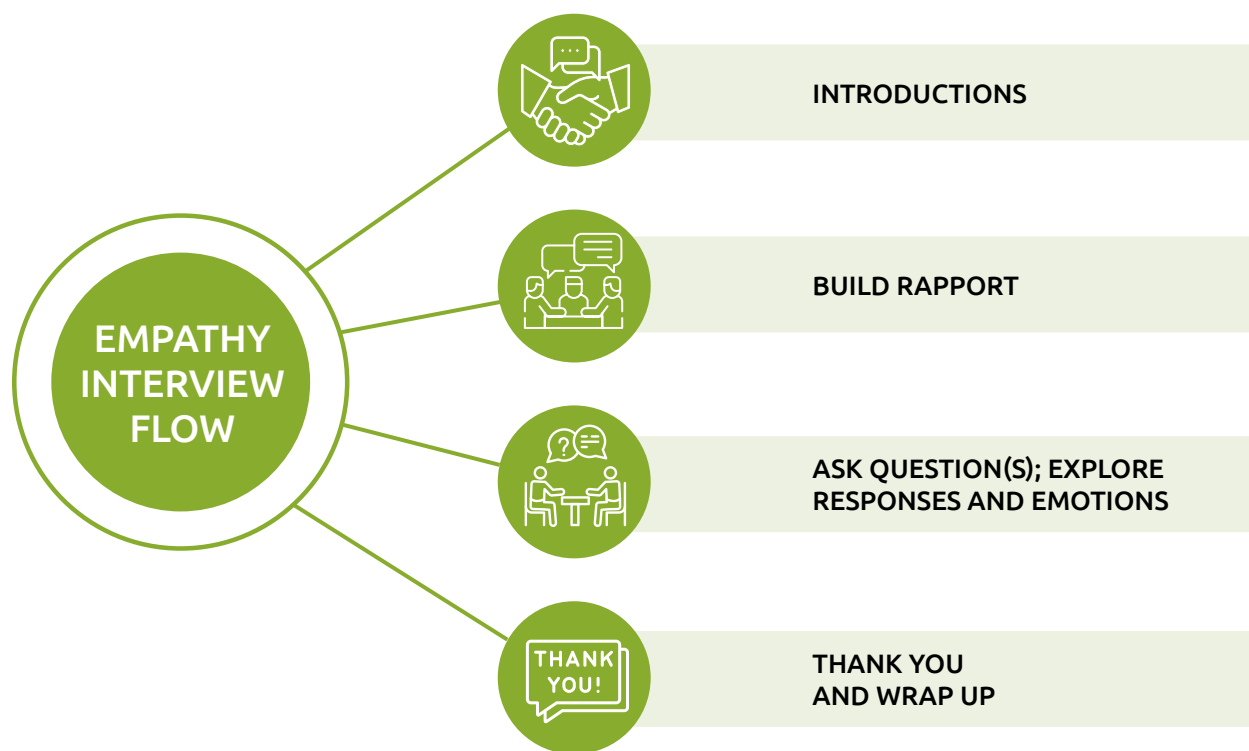
- How many people do I need or want to interview?
- Consider the size of the UCS program and school and revisit your goals — what do you want to learn and why?
- How do I recruit the families to interview?
- Consider if it is best to try to schedule time with families or to approach them at UCS or school events or activities.
- Do I need a translator?
- Consider the need for a technology tool to ease communication between you and the families that speak different languages.
- Who will conduct the interview?
- Consider someone who speaks the same language and has an established relationship with the person they are interviewing.
- Where and when will I/we conduct the interviews?
- This should be a neutral, safe space where you can hear and focus on the family member.

3**CONDUCT
EMPATHY
INTERVIEWS****Step 3. How will you conduct the empathy interview?**

When conducting an empathy interview, keep it informal and conversational. Your role is that of listener and prompter, with the family member doing most of the talking.

Figure 6 highlights the phases of a typical empathy interview and the approximate length of time spent on each phase, from introducing yourself to thank you and wrap up.

Figure 6. The Flow of an Empathy Interview



Source: Adapted from Hasso Plattner, Institute of Design at Stanford, Empathy Fieldguide²⁰

These informal conversations are short! They should not last more than 10-15 minutes. This short timeline allows you to conduct empathy interviews with families or caregivers during lunch or other breaks, during parent-teacher conferences, during UCS events, or even during school pick-ups and drop-offs.

For empathy interviews, building rapport with the family is crucial. Your tone should be genuine and warm. The conversation should not be rushed — if you don't have 15 minutes, find another time to meet with the family. Focus on who you are speaking with and what they are saying; you are seeking to understand, not to confirm.

Accessibility and Inclusion Self-Reflection: Equitable Family Engagement

Consider how your lived experience affects how and what families share with you.

- How does my lived experience inform my attitude and assumptions about families?
- What do I expect from them? Do they know this? Does it align with what families expect from me/us?

**PAUSE
AND
PONDER**

²⁰ <https://hci.stanford.edu/courses/cs147/2022/wi/readings/FIELDGUIDE-Screen-DTBC-March-2015-V2.pdf>



Whether you are conducting an empathy interview in-person or virtually (using a web-based tool with video), pay attention to your body language—keep eye contact, smile, and nod to show your interest in what they are saying.

If you are conducting an empathy interview by phone, use gestures when you are talking — these can often be heard in your voice (e.g., smiling, nodding your head) — and follow up when appropriate with affirmative words or sounds such as ‘ah,’ ‘ok,’ ‘hmm.’

TIPS for Retaining the Conversation

1. Ask the family member if it is okay to audio-record them so you can focus on them and refer to the recording later; be sure to let them know it is only for your notes and not something you will share with anyone else.
2. Immediately after an empathy interview, type or write down the notes, especially quotes from families.



Step 4. How do you make meaning across the empathy interviews?

After you gather information from several families, including their thoughts and feelings on the topic, create “headlines.” Headlines, like in newspapers, are the main point or theme. Below are strategies on how to create headlines by identifying the main points or themes:

- Describe what families actually said. Do not interpret what families said — use their language. If you are not clear about something, ask the family to explain it or leave it out. Using the family’s language acknowledges and respects their lived experience.
- Group family member comments (or quotes) that are similar. This will help you to create themes of those common ideas and experiences.

Example of Grouping Excerpts Together Around a Common Theme:

Because I know they like the attention. They deserve it. Here they are doing an activity just like anyone else. It has changed my Ray, and I wish other parents could see how their kid is able to participate. And how amazing these kids are with one another.

... My kids attended Special Olympics meets, and it was such an eye opener for me. It just gave me a boost of, "Oh my gosh, my kids are going to be ok in life."

... My father, he's 80 ... I took him to one of the meets and he's like, "So, you're telling me everybody here has a disability?" I'm like, "yes." He didn't show it, but I know internally he was in awe. So you want to talk about touching culture ... I brought my 80-year-old father. He's always worried; then he sees this and it's encouraging.

... The students with parents who do not have special needs children, I think it's important for them to be part of it. So they can realize ... then they can explain it to their children.

- Create your headlines using one theme per headline.
 - **Example of Identifying a Theme/Headline from Common Ideas:**
'Families Seeing Athletes and Partners in Action'
- Summarize what the headlines are telling you about the experiences of diverse family members participating in your classroom, school, UCS activity or event. Include feelings of belonging. What did you hear? What are you learning about the root causes that contribute to an issue?
 - **Example of Summarizing a Theme/Headline:**
It is impactful for families to see athletes and partners play, support, and be a community. We need to consider ways of bringing these moments to families that are unable to attend events. Suggestions include photos, videos, video clips, and live streaming. We also need to communicate that participation is not limited to parents and caregivers; all family members can attend.

**5****FOLLOW UP
WITH
FAMILIES****Step 5. How do you get feedback on your headlines or themes?**

Ideally, you will want to check back with the families you spoke with to be sure that the headlines you created represent what they said. Share the headlines or themes and summaries that reflect what a given family shared. This guarantees that what you think you heard is what the family meant and gives family members a chance to clarify anything that might have been misunderstood.

This follow up can empower and validate families, and it shows your intention to listen, understand, and potentially take action based on their thoughts and feelings. You are also building relationships and trust with the families.

If follow up is not possible, you can also ask colleagues, "This is what I found; does it make sense to you?" and revise your analysis as needed.

6**PLAN
NEXT
STEPS****Step 6. What do you do with the findings?**

After you have analyzed what families shared and followed up with them or others, consider how you might be able to use that information for program improvement. You may want to share your findings with a Unified/PE coach, your administrator, or a colleague to discuss what you would like to address and solutions for doing so. If you have limited information, you can conduct more empathy interviews at a later date and look for trends over a longer period of time.

Example of Planning Next Steps:

1. Look into the feasibility of livestreaming. Reach out to families to see if anyone has any connections.
2. Talk with a photography teacher (at school or another school or a local community college) about recruiting a photography student to take photos and videos of the events and to edit footage to 1-2 minute clips of the athletes.
3. When informing parents of an event, make it clear that all family members are welcome and encouraged to attend.

**Empathy Interviews in Action**

Click on the link below for a demonstration video on empathy interviews between two students.

Topic: How to create better morning experiences for people [1:50 minutes]

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QilzTA0OR60>



Empathy Interview Checklist

The following checklist helps you stay organized and track key elements of the empathy interview **process**. It is not an exhaustive list, but a guide to support you.

Feel free to include additional items.

CHECK	STEPS
	Step 1: Plan and prepare for the empathy interview
	Identify your purpose for the empathy interview.
	Identify 1-3 open-ended questions
	Step 2: Identify family members to speak with
	Determine how many people you would like to talk to.
	Identify people likely to have different lived experiences
	Identify when and where you will conduct the empathy interviews.
	Step 3: Conduct the empathy interview
	Practice the empathy interview.
	Identify who will conduct the empathy interview and who will record it.
	Step 4: Make meaning across the empathy interview(s)
	Discuss the interviews, if working with a partner.
	Review the empathy interviews.
	Identify themes or main ideas from the empathy interviews.
	Group common ideas.
	Summarize the themes or main ideas.
	Step 5: Follow up with families/ caregivers
	Check back with your families to confirm that what you identified accurately reflects their experience and feelings.
	Step 6. Determine how you will use what you found from the empathy interviews.
	Share your findings with someone.
	Decide on next steps.



UCS Empathy Interview Template

Date / Type

Location

Purpose and Question(s)

Family/Parent

Interviewer

Introductions (1 minute) [instructions and sample questions]

Notes [Enter your questions and notes from the interview below]

Build Rapport (2 minutes) [instructions and sample questions]

Notes [Enter your questions and notes from the interview below]

Ask Main Question and Explore Responses / Emotions (5-10 minutes) [instructions and sample questions]

Notes [Enter your questions and notes from the interview below]

Thank You and Wrap Up (1-2 minutes) [instructions and sample questions]

Notes [Enter your questions and notes from the interview below]



SAMPLE INVITATION FOR PARENTS TO SHARE THEIR UCS EXPERIENCES

(Email, Text, Letter)

COPY & PASTE



[INSERT STATE SOUCS AND SCHOOL LOGO HERE]

Subject: Invitation to share your UCS experiences

Dear [name of parent or family member]:

We really enjoy [student's name] participation in the [name of UCS program/activity/event] and your support of [student name] to be part of the UCS community.

I would greatly appreciate a short 15-minute conversation with you to hear your thoughts and feelings about [the program]?

Please let me know the best days of the week and times of day to reach you. You can reach me by text or email at [insert text number / email address].

Thank you, and I look forward to hearing from you!

[insert name, title]

[Insert contact information]



SAMPLE INVITATION FOR PARENTS TO SHARE THEIR UCS EXPERIENCES

(Email, Text, Letter)

COPY & PASTE



[INSERT STATE SOUCS AND SCHOOL LOGO HERE]

Asunto: Le invitamos a compartir su experiencia

Estimado/a [name of parent or family member]:

Nos complace mucho la participación de [student's name] en el [name of UCS program/activity/event] y su apoyo para que [student name] sea parte de la comunidad de UCS.

Me gustaría conversar brevemente con usted, por 15 minutos , para conocer sus opiniones y percepciones sobre [the program].

Por favor, indíqueme los mejores días de la semana y horarios en que puedo contactarlo/a. Puede comunicarse conmigo por mensaje de texto o por correo electrónico a [insert text number/email address].

¡Gracias, y espero su respuesta!

[insert name, title]

[Insert contact information]



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Family Engagement Toolkit

For questions or comments about the Toolkit, please contact:

ucs@specialolympics.help