

Theory of Change: A Practical Tool For Action, Results and Learning

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Exercise

EXERCISE: CREATING A THEORY OF CHANGE WITH THE COMMUNITY

Use the blank chart provided on the next page to assist you in developing an outcome map.

TIP: It is helpful to create this map on a large wall using half sheets of paper that you can arrange to match the template of the outcome map on the following page. Simply tape these half sheets of paper on the wall and move them around as the map is developed and refined.

Step 1: Clarify Goals. First, identify the ultimate impact you want to achieve in your community. The impact will generally be an ambitious visionary statement that stands for a healthy, thriving community – not specific program clients or the results of a specific strategy. Your impact statement will involve the contributions of many strategies and partners. Examples of ultimate impacts follow:

- ▶ Children have equal opportunities to succeed in school.
- ▶ Children are healthy and safe.
- ▶ Families are strong and united.
- ▶ Neighborhoods are strong and cohesive.
- ▶ All families and individuals have a roof overhead and food to eat.
- ▶ All families and individuals are self-sufficient.

List the ultimate impact in the **goal** rectangle at the bottom of the chart. It is important to develop a group consensus about this goal. Typically the statements are broad enough to make everyone feel comfortable, included and inspired. The distinction among impact statements is the level of focus (i.e., children, families, neighborhoods or communities).

Step 2: Identify Powerful Strategies. Consider specific **strategies** or programs (that are currently in place as part of your partnership) which address your ultimate impact. These strategies may include program strategies, campaigns, initiatives, collaborations, public awareness efforts, capacity-building efforts, community mobilization efforts and so on. Here are some examples:

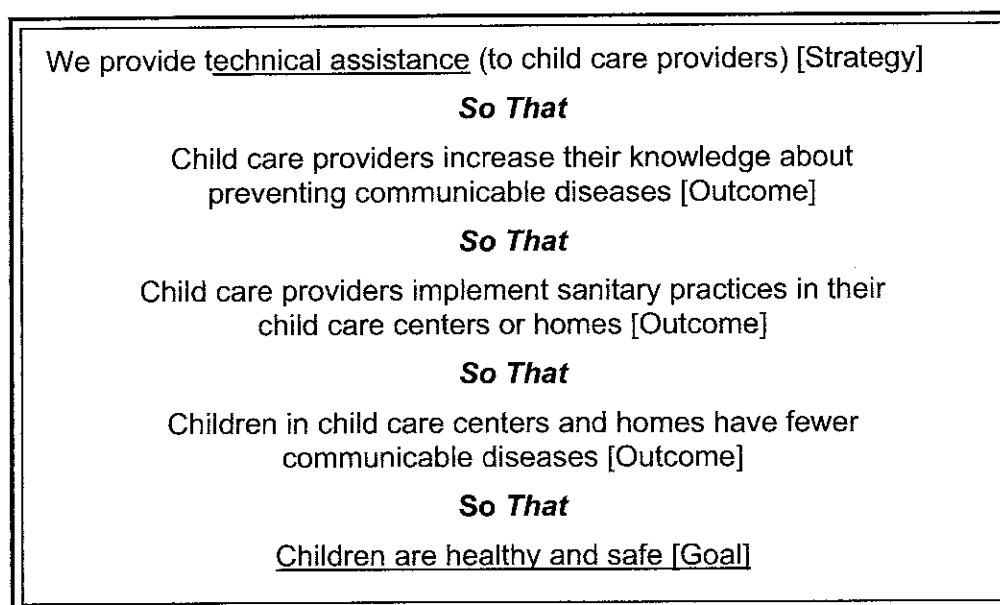
- ▶ Case management services
- ▶ Media campaign
- ▶ Alliance for education
- ▶ Block organizing
- ▶ Leadership development
- ▶ Technical assistance
- ▶ Counseling services
- ▶ Courses and workshops
- ▶ Advocacy
- ▶ Resource development and distribution

List your strategies in the ovals at the top of the chart.

Step 3: Create "So That" Chains. Take the first strategy listed and create a "so that" chain based on the following question:

"We do X strategy so that (blank) results for individuals, families, organizations or communities?" The answer should be the direct **outcome** or result of the strategy. Repeat this question until you have linked each strategy to your goal.

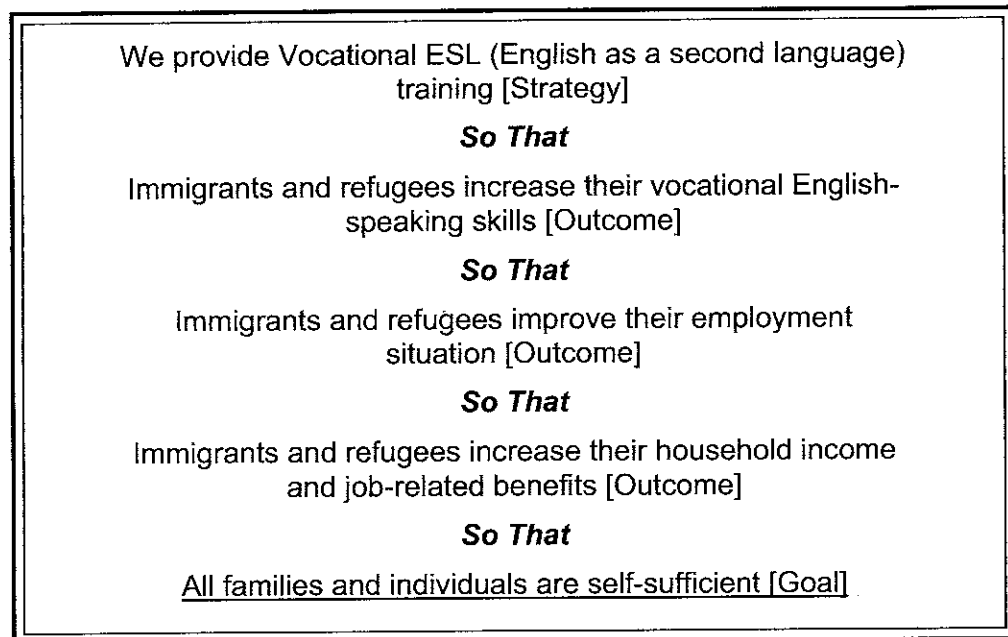
For example:



Notice that this chain of statements moved from knowledge of child care providers to behavior of child care providers and from health status of children in programs to health status of children in the community. Each link is a logical sequence of events showing how community change can occur through a specific strategy.

Rarely is one strategy alone sufficient to achieve community change. Some parallel strategies could be to launch a public awareness campaign to focus on the importance of child care quality in the selection of care or to advocate for increasing the health and safety standards for licensing requirements.

Here's another example:

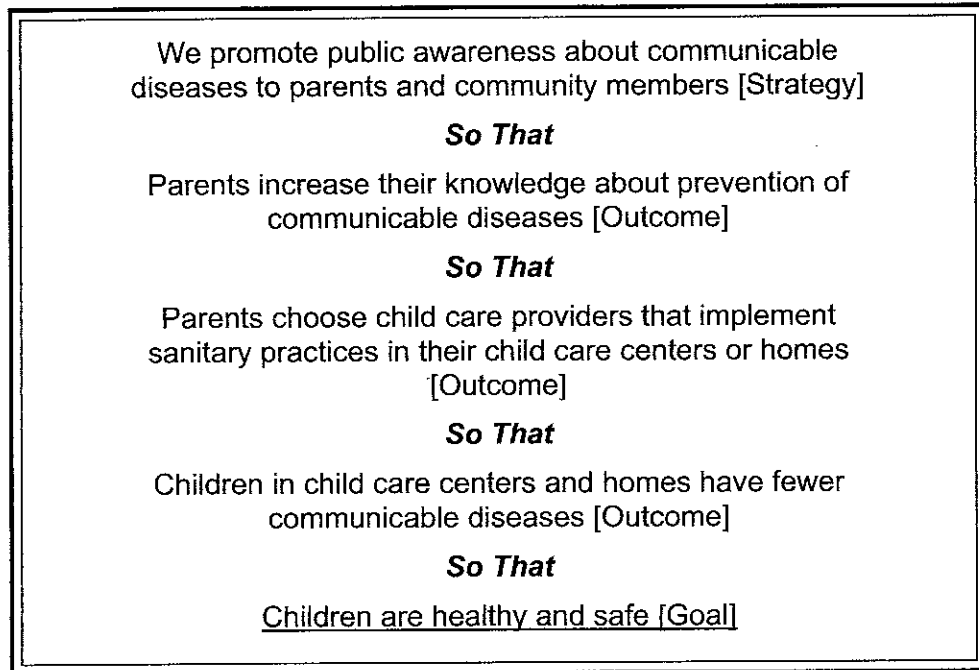


In addition to this strategy, other strategies may include employer education about cultural competency in the workplace, advocacy for improved public transportation and family support programs to connect families with support networks. Again, each strategy is linked to the ultimate goal, and some strategies may link to a common intermediate outcome on the way to the goal.

Step 4: Link Strategies with Outcomes and Goals. Place the outcomes that form the "so that" chain in rectangles between the strategy and the goal. Draw arrows between these strategies and the connected outcomes and goal. Repeat this for each strategy.

This process may reveal that the strategies lead to a common outcome at some point in the map. This is not only acceptable but also very likely to happen because it typically takes more than one strategy to achieve a particular outcome. It is uncommon, but possible, for an outcome map to consist of multiple independent "so that" chains that do not connect to each other. Rather, most change strategies include a high level of interdependency among strategies and outcomes since it usually takes more than one strategy to influence particular outcomes.

Take the example of the outcomes related to the goal: "Children are healthy and safe." Along with technical assistance to child care providers, a program may use a public awareness campaign.



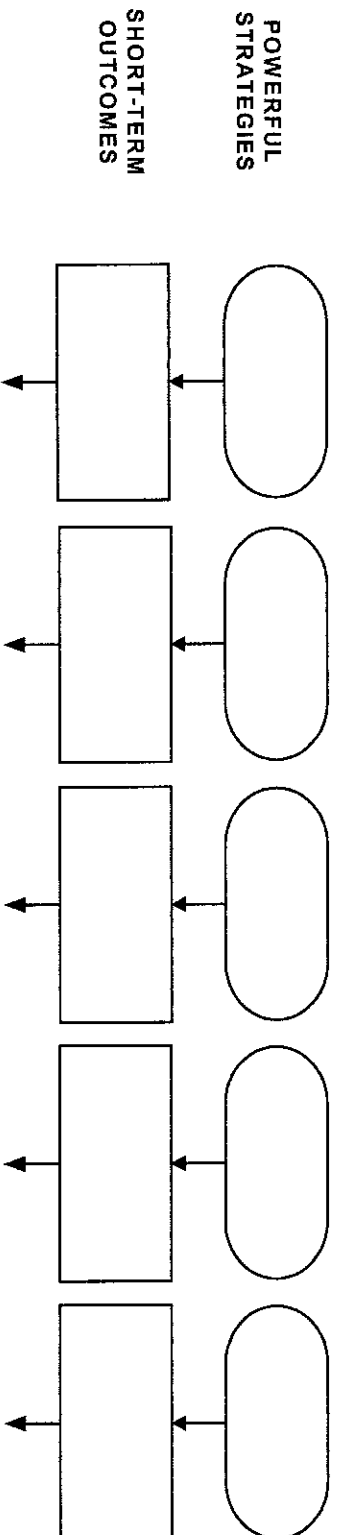
As shown in the “so that” chain, separate but interdependent strategies lead to a common outcome (i.e., Children in child care centers and homes have fewer communicable diseases).

Step 5: Test the Logic and Relevance. Review your completed map and share it with other stakeholders. Test whether logical linkages occur between the strategies, outcomes and impacts; whether the most relevant outcomes are included and whether you have included all of the relevant strategies. Based on these tests, revise, test and revise some more. It is typical for a theory of change outcome map to be revised several times before it provides a complete and clear picture of your community change effort.

Step 6: Articulate Assumptions. While the outcome map offers a visual sketch of the pathways to achieving outcomes, this work is embedded in a context. It is helpful to complete the story by articulating the assumptions that influenced the map's design.

There are no hard and fast rules about what to list in the assumptions. It is useful to provide narrative information about the principles and belief system that underlie the outcome map. Often these statements will be part of the discussion while you are constructing the map. It helps to record the assumptions in an ongoing process while you are creating your map and to compile them once the map is complete.

Exercise: Outcome Map

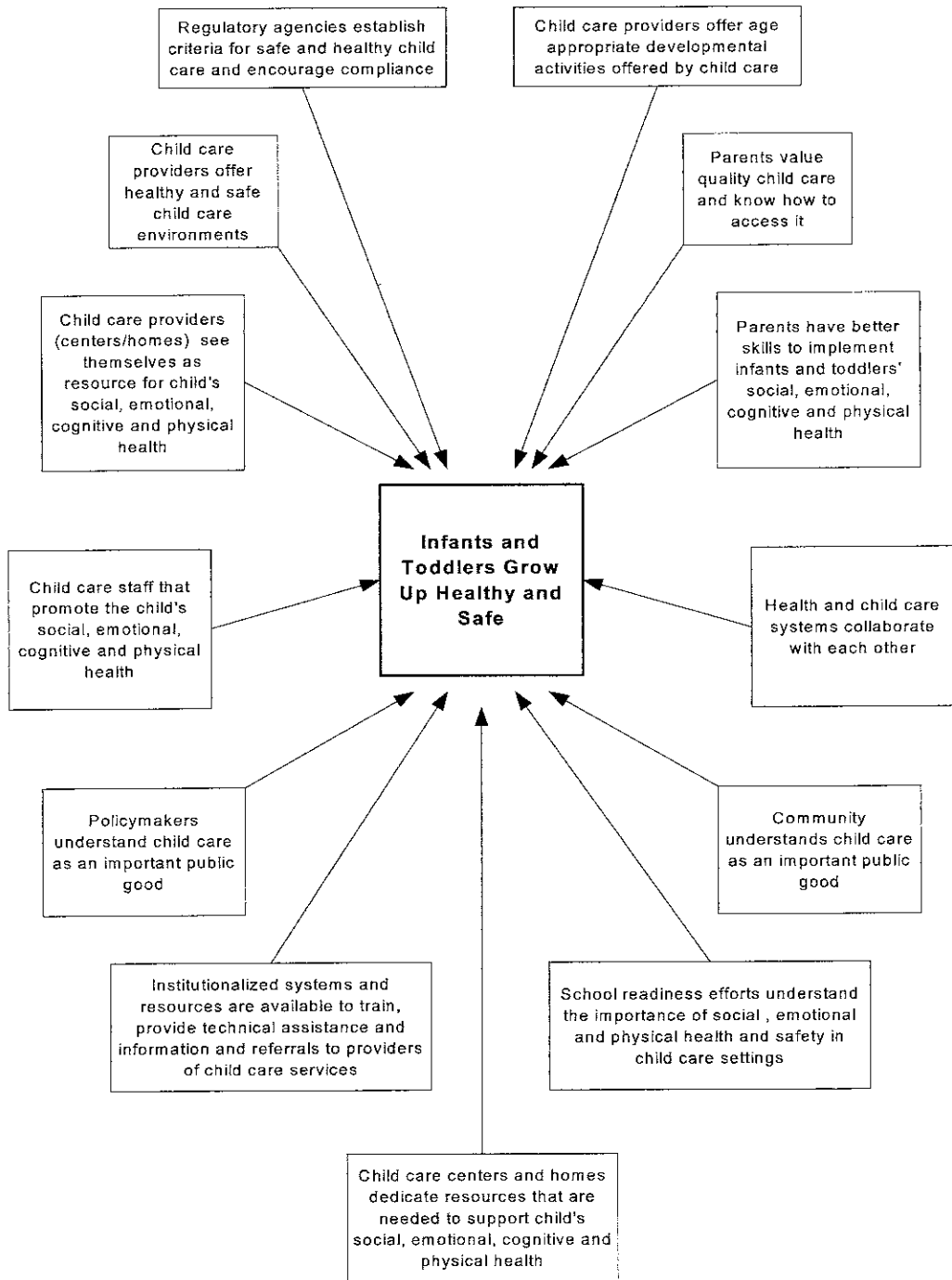


(Complete Chain from Short-term Outcomes to Community Goal)

LONG-TERM
COMMUNITY
GOAL



Healthy Child Care Washington Theory of Change (2/13/03)



USING A THEORY OF CHANGE AS A COMPANION TO ACTION

Your theory of change should be your companion to action. It should serve your community, not bog it down. It should help your community breathe life into its initiatives. It should help leaders lead and communities bond together with a common purpose. It should help break down silos, point out connectivity and attract collaborators working toward the same positive results in communities. It should communicate to broad audiences what you are trying to achieve, how you are going about it, your successes along the way and obstacles to overcome. Be sure to test your theory of change, learn from it and adjust your actions accordingly.

Here are some practical ways your community can use its theory of change.

Planning tool

- ▶ Define the scope and scale of your *Making Connections* work.
- ▶ Focus attention on key outcomes and powerful strategies for achieving these outcomes.
- ▶ Provide a framework for sequencing and prioritizing the part of the “work” your community selects for its contribution to neighborhood transformation.

Improve and assure accountability

- ▶ Provide a framework for gauging whether your *Making Connections* strategies are achieving tangible goals.
- ▶ Identify the prioritized outcomes and strategies your initiative intends to document and/or measure to gauge your progress.
- ▶ Provide a tangible foundation for “holding yourself accountable” to making a difference.

Resource allocation decisions

- ▶ Provide a framework for investing resources in strategies that are linked to your initiative’s prioritized outcomes.
- ▶ Guide decision making about how to spend limited resources.
- ▶ Provide a basis for discontinuing and refocusing funding to the most effective areas.

Communicate and market your roadmap to community change

- ▶ Communicate your *Making Connections* community change roadmap to partners, stakeholders, investors and the community.
- ▶ Provide transparency to your work by clearly identifying your prioritized strategies and expected accomplishments.
- ▶ Tell a consistent “story” about *Making Connections*.

Direct link to action

- ▶ Establish focus areas and direction for shaping programs, activities, policies, partnerships and other efforts that support neighborhood transformation.
- ▶ Act with a clear purpose in the context of *Making Connections* activities.
- ▶ Provide a reference point for measuring whether specific actions are effecting positive changes in the lives of children, families and neighborhoods.
- ▶ Maintain the “big picture” that guides your specific actions.

Most importantly, after you create your theory of change, be sure to use it. Review and apply it frequently, using the suggestions outlined above. Finally, keep in mind there is nothing as practical as good theory.

NOTES:
