

# RPG Participant In-depth Interviews

## Discussion Guide

### Note to Interviewer

This protocol is designed to capture important events, experiences, and turning points over the life course and to illuminate their interconnections, particularly as they relate to involvement with the child welfare system and the participant's own or familial substance use.

The protocol examines key topics across three life phases—childhood, teenage years, and adulthood—and also briefly explores the participant's future. Use a blank piece of paper to create a paper lifeline to help frame and orient the conversation. Use the interview questions and affiliated probes to flesh out the participant's narrative and further facilitate the discussion.

The discussion and development of the lifeline should be participant-led to the extent they are willing. Depending on the flow of conversation, you do not need to ask every question to every participant, particularly if certain questions are not relevant to what you learn about their experiences.

## I. Study introduction and consent

Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today. My name is \_\_\_\_\_ and I am with a company called Mathematica. We do not work for the [RPG project].

I want to start by giving you some information about why we are meeting with you today as part of a study we are doing.

Before we start, could you share what you call [RPG project]? I've heard it called [RPG project] but I'd like to call it whatever term is recognizable to you.

**[INTERVIEWER: Give the participant a paper copy of the consent form.]**

Here is a copy of the consent form for this study. You can follow along on that form while I talk. Please feel free to ask questions about the information.

You are being asked to take part in an in-depth interview for a research study. The study is being conducted by Mathematica, an independent research firm, on behalf of the Children's Bureau, which is part of the Administration for Children and Families within the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services. The Children's Bureau funds the Regional Partnership Grant program (RPG). The services you are enrolled in are part of RPG. Mathematica is doing interviews with people who have received services through RPG projects to learn more about their past experiences, especially those that may have led to substance use and child welfare system involvement, and to hear their thoughts and opinions about the project.

The interview is part of a larger study that Mathematica is doing for the Children's Bureau. This study will provide information on how RPG projects are working and how they have affected the families and

children they aim to help. It will also help us learn about your experiences that have led up to families being involved with RPG projects.

What we're doing today is different from a survey or interview—it will be more like a conversation. We hope this conversation will give you a chance to reflect on different times of your life and to tell us in your own words what you see as important points in your journey. I will ask you some questions we have prepared, but I'm sure you will have some things to talk about, too. Our conversation will last up to 2 hours and we will only talk this one time. We will use the information discussed in interviews to write a summary of what we have learned.

Please remember that we are interested in your experiences and opinions. There are no right or wrong answers. We will be asking about your experiences with child welfare as an adult and, if applicable, as a child, and your experiences with substance use and recovery. My hope is that you will feel comfortable talking with me, but if at any time I ask you a question and you do not want to answer it, feel free to say so and we will move on. If at any point you need a break, we can take a break.

The information is being collected for research purposes only. We will group your responses with the responses of everyone else we speak with when we report out information from these conversations. We will not connect your name to anything you say. We will keep your identity and what you say here private to the extent permitted by law. That means we will not share what you say here with others unless you report a concern about immediate harm to you or someone else. If there is such a safety concern, we may help connect you with appropriate supports, such as your service provider from the RPG project or another source for immediate support (for example, a crisis hotline). In these situations, we will only share the safety concern, and not your responses to the study questions.

We will record the interview conversation to capture the information for our reports. Only the Mathematica study team will listen to the recordings. The recordings will be destroyed after the study ends in September 2027. You can choose not to participate in the interview and there will be no consequences if you choose not to participate. You can also choose not to answer a question and you may stop the interview at any time. Your responses will not affect any services or benefits you or your family members receive through any programs.

You will receive a \$75 gift card in appreciation for your participation. You will receive the gift card even if you do not answer all of the questions.

Finally, please note that an agency may not conduct or sponsor, and a person is not required to respond to, a collection of information unless it displays a currently valid OMB control number. The OMB number is 0970-0527 and the expiration date is: **XX/XX/XXXX**.

Do you have any questions about the information we just discussed?

I am going to turn the recorder on now. **[INTERVIEWER: Turn recorder on, state your name, the date, and the participant's assigned ID number]**

**OBTAINING CONSENT:** Do you agree to take part in today's interview? **[INTERVIEWER: Mark the participant's response at the top of the page]**

- If yes: Great, let's get started.
- If no: You are free to leave. Thank you for your time.

## II. Introduction of lifeline tool

**[INTERVIEWER: Take out paper to start the Lifeline Tool.]**

Before we get started, I'm going to take out a piece of paper and we're going to use it as we talk. This will help guide our conversation and better understand the different milestones or turning points in your life. We also want to make sure we capture periods of child welfare involvement (in your childhood or as an adult), substance use, and treatment and recovery.

As we talk, we'll add information about your life to this piece of paper, including important dates, big events and turning points, and other information that you think should be included. We can star items that you think stand out from the rest. I want to give you a chance to make this tool your own. I placed some colored pencils and markers on the table so you can feel free to draw or mark on the paper as you wish.

Do you have a favorite color? Pick a marker/colored pencil to write with.

[Draw a blank lifeline on the page.]

Let's start by adding your **current age, and the names and age(s) of your kid(s) in the corner or bottom of the page.**

And because we'd like to learn more about you, what do you like to do in your free time?

## III. Overview of RPG and other services

**[INTERVIEWER: Refer to the RPG project using the name that the participant told you at the start.]**

I'd like to start by learning a bit about the services you receive. Then we'll talk more about them later in the interview.

1. Briefly describe the services you have received in the [RPG project].
  - a. What are the main types of activities that you have participated in? (*Examples: meet with your case manager, meet with a navigator or peer support, meet with a therapist, etc.*)
2. Briefly describe other kinds of services you receive from...
  - a. the child welfare system
  - b. a substance use treatment service provider
  - c. the court
  - d. other types of service providers (e.g. mental health, domestic violence)

## IV. Living situation

Now, I'd like to get a better sense of your living and housing situation. Tell me about where you live and whom you live with.

1. How many people currently live in your household, including family and non-family members? How many of these people are children?
2. Have there been any recent changes in the household members in the past year? If so, what were these changes and why did they occur? (*Probe: Who was added or left the household? Did this include any moves to another location?*)

3. How long have you been in this current living situation? What was your living situation just before this one and for how long were you there? *(Probe: If applicable, keep asking about each previous living situation—where, with whom, why they left—until you have a sense of how stable their living situation has been in the past year.)*

## V. Past experiences

### Notes to Interviewer

Use the symbols discussed during training to note important or impactful events or experiences on the participant's lifeline. Be sure to note what they consider to be high points, low points, or turning points. The participant may make additional notations on their timeline as they see fit.

### Recurring Probes

For each important event identified, probe on the following to elicit additional information and detail. You will not go through every probe for each event/experience the participant identifies, but these are topics we are particularly interested in understanding.

1. In what ways did [event] impact your life?
2. What challenges did it create?
3. How did you get through this? What coping strategies did you use during this time?
4. What supports or programs, if any, did you use during this time? Of these supports, what were most helpful to you?
5. What else would have been helpful to you during this time? Is there any support you wish you had that you didn't get?

Let's start with your childhood then we'll do the teenage years and adulthood. I will ask you similar questions for each of these time periods.

### Childhood

Tell me about what it was like for you growing up. Take me up to about age 12. I'd like to hear about important things—good or not so good—that happened and important changes during this time.

**[INTERVIEWER: Remind the participant throughout this section that the questions are focused on the period up to about age 12 or another defining moment that they identify around that age (e.g. change in schools)]**

1. Who was around in your family/household during childhood? *(Probe: Who were the main characters? Who was the primary caregiver? Were there changes in the family/household members?)*
  - a. How did everyone get along? *(Probe: Describe relationships between the adult(s), adult(s) and children, siblings. How did you help each other out? What were key challenges or sources of tension?)*
  - b. How did you feel about how things were going with your family at this point in your life? *(Probe: What was going well? What was not going well?)*
  - c. Were there particular family/household members that you were closest to? *(Probe: What contributed to that closeness?)*

2. What was the economic situation like during your childhood? *(Probe: Household financial stability? Did you feel that your needs were met?)*
3. What was your housing situation like during childhood? *(Probe: Did you move around a lot or experience homelessness? If applicable, what was your favorite place you lived as a child?)*
4. What was school like for you during childhood? *(Probe: Did you like school? How well did you get along with other students? Did you have any adults at school you liked or could rely on?)*
5. What were other important parts of your life during childhood (e.g., religion, sports, arts, friends, etc.)? *(Probe: Why were these important?)*
6. How would you describe your health as a child? *(Probe: Tell me about any major changes to your physical health and/or mental health.)*
  - a. Did you have access to the health-related services you needed? How well did the services meet your needs?
7. In what ways did substance use impact your childhood? *(Probe: How prevalent was drug or alcohol use among family/household members and what type? How prevalent was substance use in your school and community? If it wasn't prevalent, what do you think contributed to that?)*
  - a. To what extent were you using substances at this age? *(Probe: If applicable, how old were you the first time you used substances? What do you think prompted your use of substances? [If no substance use] What kept you from using substances at this age?)*
  - b. [If applicable] Tell me about your/other family member's experiences with substance use treatment during childhood (e.g. parent in and out of recovery).
  - c. [If applicable] How did your family or other adults manage your/other family member's substance use during this time?
8. Were you involved with the child welfare system during childhood? IF YES: Tell me about what that was like. *(Probe: When were you involved with child welfare? Why were you involved? Were siblings involved with child welfare? What was the extent of the involvement (e.g. open case, removal/placement) and for how long?)*
  - a. [If applicable] Describe what you thought about your child welfare involvement at this time.
  - b. [If applicable] How was substance use connected to your child welfare involvement?
9. Are there any other important events or experiences—good or bad—that we did not cover yet during childhood? Is there anything else that was a turning point during this age?
10. What kind of future did you picture for yourself at this age?

**[INTERVIEWER: Check with the participant that important events and experiences have been accurately captured on their lifeline.]**

### Teenage years

Now we'll talk about your teenage years. So, from the age of about 13 up until around the age of 18.

**[INTERVIEWER: Remind the participant as needed throughout this section that the questions are focused on the period from about age 13 to 18 or another defining moment they identify around that age (e.g. emancipating from child welfare.)]**

1. Who was around in your family/household when you were a teenager? *(Probes: Who were the main characters? Who was the primary caregiver? Who made decisions? Who was the disciplinarian? Were there changes in the family/household? Did you experience any pregnancies?)*
  - a. How did everyone get along? *(Probe: Describe relationships between the adult(s), adult(s) and children, siblings. How did you help each other out? What were key challenges or sources of tension?)*
  - b. How did you feel about how things were going with your family at this point in your life? *(Probe: What was going well? What was not going well?)*
  - c. Were there particular family/household members that you were closest to? *(Probe: What contributed to that closeness?)*
2. What was the economic situation like when you were a teenager? *(Probe: Household financial stability? Did you feel that your needs were met?)*
3. What was your housing situation like when you were a teenager? *(Probe: Did you move around a lot or experience homelessness? If applicable, what was your favorite place you lived as a teenager?)*
4. What was school like for you when you were a teenager? *(Probe: Did you like school? Did you have a regular group of friends that you could rely on? Did you have any adults at school you liked or could rely on?)*
5. What were other important parts of your life when you were a teenager (e.g., religion, sports, arts, a job etc.)? *(Probe: Why were these important? How long were you involved in them?)*
6. How would you describe your health as a teenager? *(Probe: Tell me about any major changes to your physical health, including pregnancy/fertility, and/or mental health.)*
  - a. Did you have access to the health-related services you needed? How well did the services meet your needs?
7. In what ways did substance use impact your teen years? *(Probe: How prevalent was drug or alcohol use among family/household members and what type? How prevalent was substance use in your school and community? If it wasn't prevalent, what do you think contributed to that?)*
  - a. To what extent were you using substances at this age? *(Probe: If applicable, how old were you the first time you used substances? What do you think prompted your use of substances? [If no substance use] What kept you from using substances at this age?)*
  - b. [If applicable] Tell me about your/other family member's experiences with substance use treatment during childhood (e.g. parent in and out of recovery).
  - c. [If applicable] How did your family or other adults manage your/other family member's substance use during this time?

8. Were you involved with the child welfare system as a teenager? If so, how did it impact your teenage years? *(Probe: When were you involved with child welfare? Why were you involved? Were siblings involved with child welfare? What was the extent of the involvement (e.g. open case, removal/placement) and for how long? If relevant, probe for child welfare involvement as a pregnant/expecting/parenting teen.)*
  - a. [If applicable] Describe what you thought about your child welfare involvement at this time.
  - b. [If applicable] How was substance use connected to your child welfare involvement?
  - c. [If applicable] Did you age out of child welfare and how did the child welfare system prepare you for emancipation? How did they prepare you for the transition to adulthood?
9. Are there any other important events or experiences—good or bad—that we did not cover yet during the teenage years? Is there anything else that was a turning point during this age?
10. What kind of future did you picture for yourself at this age?

**[INTERVIEWER: Check with the participant that important events and experiences have been accurately captured on their lifeline.]**

## Adulthood

Now bring me up to the present—from about the age of 18 up until now. I'd like to hear more about what has been going on for you during this time to better understand where you are now.

**[INTERVIEWER: Remind the participant as needed throughout this section that the questions are focused on the period from about age 18 to now.]**

1. We talked a lot at the beginning of our conversation about your current living situation and members of the household, and we have those on the timeline. Is there anything else you want to add about your current household and living situation?
2. Now let's think about your living situations from about the age of 18 until recently.

**[INTERVIEWER: Note for the participant the number of years between age 18 and current age. They do not have to document every single living situation, especially if there are many, but the questions below aim to understand their overall housing stability and living situations in adulthood.]**

- a. Where did you live during this time and with whom?
  - b. How stable were these living arrangements during this time?
  - c. If you moved, what prompted these moves?
  - d. If you experienced periods of homelessness, where did you stay during these times? What support did you receive related to housing and homelessness?
3. How would you describe your economic/financial situation in adulthood? What do you think has been the greatest contributor to this?
  - a. Describe your current employment and overall employment history, including job readiness training if applicable. *(Probe: What stands out about your current or past employment? Are there any aspects that you are proud of?)*

- b. Describe any education you have received as an adult. *(Probe: What stands out about your education? Are there any aspects that you are proud of?)*
  - c. What have been your experiences with receiving public benefits (e.g. TANF, SNAP, etc.) *(Probe: What stands out about these experiences? Are there any aspects that you are proud of?)*
  - d. Have any supports you received related to employment, education, or financial stability been especially helpful?
4. How would you describe your relationships with others during adulthood? *(Probe: Relationships with family, friends, children, spouse/significant other, coworkers, etc.)*
  - a. What relationships do you consider most significant to you now? How is that different than what you would have said a few years ago (if applicable)?
  - b. What major changes in relationships have you experienced (e.g. marriage, moving in together, developing an important relationship, divorce/separation/breakups, death of a loved one)?
  - c. How would you describe your relationship with your child(ren)? Please explain. *(Probe: How is this relationship affected by other caregivers, child welfare services, RPG services, or other factors?)*
5. How would you describe your health during adulthood? *(Probe: Describe any major changes to your physical health, including pregnancy/fertility, and/or mental health.)*
  - a. [If changes to physical health]: Did you have access to the healthcare services you needed? How well did the services meet your needs?
  - b. [If changes to mental health]: Did you have access to the mental health services you needed? How well did the services meet your needs?
6. Are there any other important events or experiences—good or bad—that we did not cover yet during adulthood (e.g. incarceration, sexual assault, domestic violence, personal achievements, happy memories)? Is there anything else that you would identify as a turning point?
  - a. Who has been really important to you in adulthood and why? *(Probe for important mentors, role models, partners, and best friends if not covered in previous questions)*

## VI. Lifeline reflection

Now, let's review the lifeline again to make sure that all the major events in your life are included here. We also want to make sure to capture any services and supports you received or needed more of.

1. What events on this lifeline are most important to highlight? (If not already identified) *[Star or otherwise mark these events]*
2. What major events are missing from the lifeline? *(Probe: transitions, turning points, major positive points, major negative points).*
3. Looking over these major events, what services or supports were most important or helpful for you at that time and why?



- a. What other services or supports did you need at that time and why?
4. As you look over all these major experiences you've had, does an overarching pattern or theme stand out to you?
  - a. What positive aspects of your experiences or beliefs stick out to you? *(Examples: intelligent, hard worker, strong, protector, resilient, overcoming a lot, finding a way)*

For these next few questions, I'd like to talk more about your [current/most recent] involvement with the child welfare system. I know this can be difficult to talk about, but I'm hoping that with all we have discussed so far, you will feel comfortable talking about this with me. I am not here to judge you. I want to learn from your experiences so that services for families can continue to be improved.

5. In your opinion, how is what we've talked about so far connected to your [current/most recent] involvement with the child welfare system? *(Probe: What do you think is the biggest reason you are/have been involved with the child welfare system? Is there something else that we haven't talked about that you think contributed to your involvement?)*
6. In your opinion, how is substance use connected to your involvement with the child welfare system? *(Probe: Do you think substance use contributed to your child welfare involvement or did your child welfare involvement contribute to your substance use? Please explain.)*

## VII. Participation and experiences in RPG services

**[INTERVIEWER: Refer to the RPG project using the name that the participant told you at the start.]**

Now that we've talked a lot about the experiences that brought you to [RPG project], let's spend some time talking about your experiences in [RPG project].

1. How did you learn about and enroll in [RPG project]?
2. At the start of the interview, you described the services you have received in the [RPG project]. How regularly do you participate in these activities? *(Probe: Would you say you have attended daily, weekly, more or less often?)*
3. Specifically, have the [RPG project] services improved your outcomes for:
  - a. Your child welfare case?
  - b. Your substance use treatment?
  - c. Balancing your needs related to child welfare and substance use treatment?
  - d. Obtaining other services or resources you need? *(Probe: Finding work, financial stability, housing)*
  - e. Achieving goals you've set for yourself?
4. What other supports or resources could the [RPG project] provide to help you improve your outcomes for:
  - a. Your child welfare case?
  - b. Your substance use treatment?
  - c. Balancing what you have to do for your child welfare case and your substance use treatment?

- d. Obtaining other services or resources that you need? (*Probe: Finding work, financial stability, housing*)
- e. Achieving goals you've set for yourself?

## VIII. Goals and aspirations

We have talked about a lot today, but we are almost done. We spent a lot of time looking back at your life and then we looked at your involvement in [RPG project]. Now let's extend your lifeline into the future.

1. Where do you see yourself a year from now? Five years from now?
2. How has participation in [RPG project] helped shape your vision for your future? For your family's future?
3. What supports, if any, will you need to achieve the goals you have set for yourself?
4. Is there anything else you'd like to tell me before we end?

## IX. Wrap up

Thank you again for talking with me today! I appreciate all that you have shared. I know it was a lot, but your insights are so valuable and will really help others learn from your experiences.

In appreciation for participating in the interview, you will receive \$75 gift card. We are also providing a paper with our contact information in case you have follow-up questions.

**[INTERVIEWER: Offer participant list of resources as needed]**