



Guidelines for Leading Small Group Discussions

The small group time can be one of the most rewarding segments of the daily schedule. It can also be frustrating if an adult leader doesn't know what to expect and is wondering if they should be doing something different.

The following guides will help tremendously, but there is no substitute for experience. If you do not have experience, then seek wisdom from your church youth leaders and Pastor.

While every small group at SERVE is different, you can expect...

- Students will not know each other on the first day at a SERVE Site. The Small Group notes in the Leaders Guide will give you some ideas for starting the discussion and helping them get to know each other or deepen existing relationships. The students will look to you to lead them. Be ready to do that by reading through the material head of time.
- At a SERVE Site they will have forged some relationship and dependence on each other by the second day, but will not have established a deeper sense of relationship. The Speaker will have given a specific challenge that you can follow up on. By now, you should come close to being able to call them all by name. If they are slow to discuss the given questions or to pray aloud, don't worry. Do not try to guilt them into talking or praying. Just keep setting an environment of joy and trust and acceptance.
- The third day, which is full of work, will give them the opportunity to not only labor together but to learn about the worksite, the person who needed the work to be done and about each other. During lunch you might take advantage of the "down time" and learn more about each other in an informal way. By the time you get to small group time they will feel like they know each other much better. If after tonight you still wonder if you should be doing more or doing something different, ask the Spiritual Life Coordinator or bring it up at the Leaders Meeting.

Questions:

When you ask a question, whether individually or in the small group, remember that there are basically four types of questions people use in conversations:

1. **Closed:** Do you like going to school?
2. **Open-ended:** What do you like/dislike about going to school?
3. **Informational:** How many times have you gone to Disneyland?
4. **Feeling-level:** How do you feel about going to Disneyland?

People prefer to answer open-ended and feeling-level questions to closed or informational ones. We tend to ask the latter. Open-ended and feeling-level questions, however, help the group focus on what is important to them and provide you with more information to stimulate the conversation.

Body Language:

A person's body language can say something different from what is being stated verbally. Check for facial expressions, sitting posture, crossed arms, etc. Remember, you do this also.

Set Ground Rules:

- Make sure everyone knows what to expect (i.e. only one person talking at a time, no putdowns, no whispering, no dirty or inappropriate language, and no gossiping about what other people share in small group).
- Don't Evaluate Responses (e.g. "Right, that was a good answer.")
- Avoid the one right answer syndrome, because it may lead others to think that a different response is the wrong answer. Just say thank you or some other affirming remark and go on.

Keep the Pace Rolling By:

- Being supportive (I've felt that way!)
- Clarifying (Do you actually mean...?)
- Reflective (Apparently you were very angry about...)
- Offering examples (I know a guy who...)

Don't feel the need to do this after each student shares, though.

Additional Hints for Making Small Groups More Effective:

- Be honest, listen and think.
- Never force anyone to share: Individuals should be allowed *not* to answer. Silence becomes a form of honesty as it may simply say, "I'm not willing to talk about that yet." The group is continually challenged to share at more honest levels.
- Be confidential: Practicing confidentiality is the only way anything of importance and honesty can be shared by the group. Trust is vital.
- Apathy: When the youth seem bored, don't confront it head-on by saying something like, "Why do you seem so bored?" Instead, find the cause by asking open-ended and feeling questions.
- Anger: If you sense anger in a person say something like, "I get the feeling that this is making you quite angry. Is anyone else feeling this way? What is going on?" Or if there is conflict with two of the students, you may want to diffuse the situation by using some humor or by asking them to talk with you later.

Group Silence:

Perhaps the students are thinking, or maybe they don't understand. Ask them if they understand the question and clarify if necessary.

Individual Silence:

Sometimes individuals will not feel comfortable joining a discussion on their own. If you notice someone in your group who isn't involved in the discussion, you might include them by inviting them to respond with an open-ended question such as, "What do you think about that Sue?" Or, "What's your take on that John?" However, don't try to force individuals to join the discussion if they clearly choose not to offer input.

Soap Box:

If somebody's hot button has been pushed and he or she is monopolizing the time with a side issue, use your own judgment, but if more than one person reacts, you may have to deal with the feelings that are surfacing.

Building Community Within Your Group:

- Spend time talking with each person in your group during the day. Ask them questions about themselves and their families, etc.
- Allow them to really get to know you, too. Share, be real, be honest.
- Have lots of fun! Don't take situations too seriously.
- Be flexible.
- Be inclusive.
- Be serious when necessary. The students want to learn and will be open if provided the opportunity.
- Pray with each other and for each other. Allow for different types of prayer times—you lead, group members lead, popcorn prayer, pray for the person on left or right, etc.
- Tell them you appreciate their hard work.
- Cover the theme-based material, but don't be afraid to wander off subject.
- Write notes to your group, and put them in the mailboxes provided by the Host Team (if applicable).