

CREATIVE WAYS TO START A DISCUSSION ON ANY TOPIC

unfinished sentences

They can be used to stimulate discussion. Through them, Young people can express and explore their beliefs and goals. As a result, kids can discover what their values really are.

One way to use them is:

1. Give each participant a pencil and index card
2. You can read aloud the unfinished sentences, write them on the board, or distribute them on index cards. Then have each person complete them.
3. Encourage kids to complete their sentences honestly. No one will be graded or judged right or wrong. Every answer is acceptable. Each person has the right to decline to participate and the right to anonymity.
4. Collect the completed cards, read them aloud, and discuss them.
5. Conclude your discussion by reading your own answer, and ask for feedback. Or read your answer with the others so that kids won't know it's yours. Conclude with your own comments about the discussion.

Instead of reading answers for them, have kids read their own responses aloud. This works best if kids know each other well and if there is an atmosphere of freedom and trust among them. Kids can elaborate on their responses and answer group questions or not. All answers are acceptable, and kids can decline to participate.

Here are a few samples:

I fear most...	I wish I were...	I wish I were not...
I wish I had not...	I wish I could...	If I were the leader of this country, I would...
The leader of this country should...		The happiest day of my life was...
If I could start this year over, I would...		My favorite place is ...
My parents should ...		I wish my parents wouldn't ...
What hurts me the most is ...		I wish I had...
If I had \$25, I would...		I would like to tell my best friend...
The worst thing a person could do is...		What always makes me mad is...
If I could do anything without being found out, I would...		
I always cry when...		I always laugh when...
I hate...		If I were the principal of my school, I would...
If I had a million dollars, I would...		If my parents left me alone, I would...
The most important thing in my life is...		If I had X-ray vision, I would...
The hardest thing for me to do is...		

TAPE TALK

One of the best ways to get discussion going in a youth group is to bring in various points of view on a subject. One way to do this is by interviewing people outside of the youth group on tape or video and playing it for your youth group. For example, if the subject is love, interview a young child, an elderly person, and someone from an urban neighborhood, asking them how they would define love. Edit out the bad or dull ones and this can make an interesting program and a good discussion starter.

NO RISK DISCUSSION

Some young people are intimidated when asked to express opinions on controversial issues in front of their peers and/or adult leaders. This approach will allow them to say what they feel without fear of what others might think. Cut up paper strips. Give everyone a pencil and a piece of paper. Ask questions that only require short answers and ask them one at a time. Each student writes a number 1 at the top and answers the first question, then folds the paper down to conceal his or her answer.

The papers are then passed to the person on the left and question number 2 is answered just below the folded down portion. With each question, the paper is folded and passed to a new person until all the questions are answered. Collect the papers and redistribute them again and have everyone unfold the paper they received. As you repeat the questions for discussion, each person answers the way their paper reads. Usually the result will lead to further, less inhibited discussion, especially when students discover that their views are probably shared by quite a few others in the group.

TEXTIMONY

On slips of paper write verses of Scripture dealing with some specific promises that the Lord makes to believers for their everyday lives. Then pass out the slips to the group and have them share how the Lord has been keeping that promise in their lives. If you like, you could let them pick their own verse to illustrate something that has-been happening in their lives. Maybe someone hasn't taken full advantage of a promise to which he is entitled; he might share that with the group. Someone else may have a helpful insight for that person, The group could pray for individual needs and needs that the whole group may have. Possible promises can be found in the following verses: Gal. 5:18, Eph. 2:14, John 16:23, John 14:27, John 10:10, Ps. 91:15

YARN-SHARING EXPERIENCE

In order to get your group to open up and share their inner feelings and experiences, try taking a ball of yarn (size is determined by the size of the group involved) and explain to the group that you are going to ask them to participate in a little experiment. Tell them you are going to throw the ball of yarn (while holding onto the end so the yarn will unwind) to someone in the group. The group should be in a circle. When that person catches the ball of yarn, she could share:

What God has done for her

What God has done for someone she knows

What God has done for all of us

Something that she is thankful for

Then after she has shared, she will throw the ball to someone else in the circle (while holding onto the yarn) and the next person who catches the ball will also share one of the four things above. Keep this going until everyone in the group has had a chance to share at least once (several times is best, but this depends on the size of your group and the time you have).

After you have made a spider web pattern with the yarn and everyone has had a chance to share, stop the ball and begin to ask some questions:

1. What is this yarn doing for us physically? Answers would range around the idea of holding us together. (Before this you could comment that the effect of the sharing has created a somewhat beautiful web between the members of the group.) You could briefly mention that for a beautiful pattern to evolve, everybody had to participate.
2. Have one or two members of the group drop their hold of the yarn. Immediately the center web becomes loose and the effect is for the circle to widen a little. Then ask: "What happens to the group when someone drops their yarn?" It becomes less close knitted and it makes something beautiful fall apart and turn ugly. You then could follow up with a brief talk on how Jesus teaches us to bear each other's problems, to share our happiness and sorrows, to be thankful, etc. In sharing, a beautiful network of relationships and ties are formed just like what is physically illustrated by the yarn, but that it takes everyone to hold it together.

MYSTERY GIFTS

Wrap several mystery gifts, using seasonal paper for wrapping. Vary the size of the boxes. Have several kids come up and select a gift from a box or pile of gifts. They open the gift in front of the group then give a parable, thought, lesson, or something with the gift as a theme. If possible the participants can keep the gifts. This is a great way to enhance creativity.

MYSTERY GUEST

Divide the youths into small groups of 3 or 4. Then have each group choose a Bible character and research and collect information about him or her for 10 minutes. Each group then takes the stand, and the rest of the youths ask questions of the group to try and discover who the character is. Each question must be answered yes, don't know, or no. If 10 no answers are given before the identity of the Bible character is guessed, the group wins.

HANGMAN

If you have a good idea for a lesson but aren't sure how to present it, play Hangman to reveal your outline. For example, four points on a lesson about friendship might be Acquaintance, Casual, Special, and Intimate. Instead of just telling your group these points, have kids guess each word a letter at a time. For every wrong guess, hang a part of the body from the noose. Teens will usually guess the word and will become more involved in the lesson.

RELAY DISCUSSION

Set up two, three, or four chairs in front of your group. Select a person to sit in each chair and explain that you are going to have a relay discussion. You, as the leader, will read agree-disagree controversial statements for debate or discussion. Only the people in the chairs up front can speak, everyone else listens. Once the statement has been read, the leader can turn the discussion over to those people or he can stimulate and encourage by asking each person's opinion. If a person in the front chairs does not want to speak about an issue, she may go out into the audience and tap anyone on the shoulder to take her place. The chosen person then must go up front and join in the discussion. Also, if any person in the audience has something to say at any time, he may run up front and replace any person there. Only the people in the front chairs can speak. Once you see the discussion slowing down, throw out a new statement. Also, to stimulate give and take, people can be assigned one point of view or the other, or certain chairs can be labeled AGREE and DISAGREE.

Here are some possible discussion statements:

- Jesus identified more with the lifestyle of the poor; so poor people make better Christians.
- The reason a church runs a youth program is just to prove to itself that it is doing something for youth.
- A Christian should obey his government even if it violates the Bible.
- Abortion should be a decision left to the parents or parent of the fetus.
- Bad language is cultural and is thus not un-Christian.
- Physical violence can be justified by a Christian if it is in self-defense.
- It is wrong for a Christian to drink an alcoholic beverage.
- Christianity is the only religion through which a person can get to heaven.
- Our parents discipline us because they are trying to do what is best for us.

SPOTLIGHT MEETING

In a darkened room have kids sitting in a large circle. The leader shines a spotlight (flashlight) on someone's face. Only the person the light is shining on may speak. The first round is usually word association or some nonthreatening kind of game just to get kids loosened up and into the spirit of things. In the second round, the person with the spotlight can ask each person he shines the light on one question, which that person is to answer as honestly as possible. The spotlight draws everyone's attention to that one person and can be a very effective way for kids to share with each other. Questions can be as deep or shallow as the leader feels he wants to go without embarrassing anyone, but the questions should be designed to allow kids to honestly express themselves and their faith without fear. Allow anyone to pass if they are unable to answer the question.

CURING DISCUSSION DOMINATORS

When a couple of kids dominate your discussions, the rest sit and listen to what degenerates into a conversation between two or three people. Here's a fun and nonthreatening way to break the pattern. Before beginning your next discussion, hand out two index cards to each group member. Establish these ground rules:

- Each time students want to make a comment, they must give one of their cards to the leader of the discussion. Use your judgment to permit clarifying questions without losing a card.
- After both their cards are gone, students may make no more comments until all participants have used both their cards.

The normally talkative kids will do more thinking before they speak, weighing if the comments hanging on their tongues are worth using up a card. And because the normally quieter kids know that they must inevitably venture a comment sometime, they become more mentally involved-and usually make excellent contributions to the discussion.

WISHING WELL

With the group seated in a circle, give each person two or three pennies. In the center, place a tub of water, which becomes your wishing well. Any person in the group who wants to speak sharing some concern, a wish, something they are thankful for, a special blessing throws a penny into the well and speaks. Make your well small enough so that it will take a little aim to sink the penny. This adds a little comic relief when some kids miss. Most kids will enjoy the experience and improvise as they go along, sharing pennies throwing nickels for "longer thoughts," and so on. Pennies can be saved and used again or given away.

HUMAN CONTINUUM

When discussing subjects that have many points of view, have the kids arrange themselves (prior to the discussion) in a human continuum from one extreme viewpoint to the opposite extreme. For example, if you are discussing drinking, have the kids line up with all those who are for drinking on one end and those who are against it at the other. Undecideds or moderates would be somewhere in the middle. Kids may discuss the issue among themselves as they attempt to find the right spot in the line in relationship to each other. After they are settled, further discussion or debate can take place as kids attempt to defend their positions. Anyone may change positions at anytime.

STRAW PICTURES

You will need many boxes of ordinary drinking straws. You might try getting some donated by a local fast-food restaurant or a grocery store. Divide the kids into small groups and give each group a couple boxes of straws and a large place on the floor to work. Give each group a topic or theme to be illustrated, using only the straws. The kids lay them around, placing them in position so that they eventually become a picture. The straws can be cut or hooked together, but that's all. Set a time limit and when all are finished, have some impartial judges award prizes for the best, most unusual, worst, and so forth. Topics can be just for laughs, or they can be more serious. At Christmas, for example, the group might put together a giant nativity scene, using straws. When it's completed, take some photos.

WINGING IT DISCUSSION

Pass out 3x5 cards to everyone in the room. If you have a topic you were planning to discuss, ask each of the kids to write out a question relating to the theme about something that's been bothering them or that they're struggling with in their lives. If you aren't using a theme, then they can just write out questions they have of any kind. Cards should not be signed.

After kids finish writing them, pass a box or container around the room to collect them. Have the leader read the questions, one at a time, and let the kids suggest some answers.

This is a useful approach to questions because kids can often do a great deal to help out their peers and because honest questions can be asked when they're anonymous. Throw all the finished 3x5 cards thrown on the floor in the center of a discussion circle, mixed up, and then read.

SITCOM DISCUSSIONS

To encourage discussion and creative thinking about any topic, divide into small groups of four or five people. Assign each group a popular TV situation comedy and a topic. Their task is to dramatize the topic, using the characters and format of their particular sitcoms. If the topic is substance abuse, for example, the group would act out a typical scene from the program, playing the show's characters- but in the process communicating tips, warnings, or whatever, about substance abuse.

There are always dozens of sitcoms to choose from- or old & it produces some great discussion as you debrief each performance.

LIGHTS ON & OFF

This idea can be used as a discussion starter with any topic, or it can be used simply as a fun way to test everyone's power of concentration. You will need some large drawings, photographs, or slides.

Give each person a sheet of paper. Have kids number down the left side of their sheets corresponding to the number of pictures you will show. Have them create three columns across the top of the page (Columns A, B, and C. They should write their answers in each column as they view each picture. Here are the three questions they should answer for each picture:

- A. What is the first word that this picture brings to your mind?
- B. What feeling did you experience when the picture was revealed?
- C. Write a sentence that summarizes the picture.

Turn out the lights and put up the first picture. Flip the lights on for five or 10 seconds and then off again. (If you are using slides, simply show the slide for a few seconds while the lights are off.) Next, remove the picture and put the lights back on just long enough for the kids to write down their responses. Repeat this for each picture.

After viewing all of the pictures, discuss your group's responses, pointing out the differences and the various points of view that arise concerning the pictures. The goal is to help the group learn to appreciate other viewpoints.

CRISIS RESPONSE

This is a good activity to help your kids develop their abilities to deal with difficult situations quickly and decisively. It stimulates thinking, and it encourages kids to realize that they really can come up with answers to tough issues on their own. Divide into small groups of three or four. Select a panel of judges .

Next, present a problem, crisis situation to the entire group.

Give the groups exactly one minute to come up with a response to the situation. Each group has one person (a different person each time) present the group's response.

After this, the panel of judges chooses the best response and explains why. It's a good idea for the judges to affirm the groups whose ideas are not chosen as well.

This approach adds the elements of fun and competition to learning in a very effective way.

FISH BOWL

Ease your teens into Scripture reading and sharing by playing Fish Bowl. Arrange chairs in a circle, with one chair in the middle. Whoever sits in the middle is in the fish bowl and does the talking.

Next prepare on note cards some inspirational or Scripture verse and a brief commentary, with a question that invites readers to share their thoughts.

Add the note card with the Scripture reading to a stack of blank cards, then deal out the cards at random to the kids. Whoever receives the card with the Scripture reading goes into the fish bowl and

reads the Scripture, the commentary, and responds to the question. If a student gets the card more than twice, she has the option to choose someone else to take her place.

video intro

For a fun way to introduce a topic, say, on God's love, get a video camera and tape the leader asking a question like "How do you know that God really loves you?" Then, as if in response to that question, videotape the answers of some of your kids to the slightly different question, "How do you know your boyfriend/girlfriend really loves you?" Their answers will play back immediately following the original question, making for hilarious results. Make sure the kids you videotape use only the pronoun he or she in their answers, and not proper names or other references.

HOW DO YOU FEEL?

To help kids express their feelings to each other in creative ways, form small groups in which students express how they are feeling in terms of, say, automobiles: "I feel like a red Porsche" or "I'm just about out of gas right now."

Subjects and images to choose from:

Car	Flower	Song	Number	Toy	Color	Year	Day
Month		Season	Fruit		Vegetable	Flavor	
Holiday		Sandwich	Candy		Road sign		Book
Shoes		Time	Money		Jewelry		
Furniture		Animal	Building	Sport	Movie		Cookie
Cake		Beverage	Cereal		Ice cream	Feeling	Word
Temperature		Weather					

STUMP THE SPEAKER

Ask kids to find objects in their pockets, purses, or around the room. Call on students one at a time to give you their objects. You then have 15 seconds to think up a 30-second object lesson, using that item to teach a spiritual truth. If you can't do it, but the student can, the student wins a prize.

This game will get your creative juices flowing-plus, it's a great way to pass the time if you finish your lesson early. As a variation, select a kid to be the speaker.

THIS BOTHERS ME

A kid tells what bothers him most about the topic, and the group members vote for the complaints they agree with the most. Each kid in the group gets a chance to describe what really bugs him or her the most. You can then use the answers the kids give as a springboard for discussion.