

LEADING DISCUSSIONS

Starting a discussion, and keeping it going... 10 tips for creating a comfortable small group atmosphere- so all students will enjoy participating.

1. Encourage your students to verbalize their views & feelings, however unusual they may be

Nothing kills a discussion faster than when kids don't feel safe to say what they feel. Small groups should be a place where kids can be honest about what they're thinking and feeling -no matter what's on their mind. What students discover for themselves remains with them far longer than anything you tell them. Be slow to correct them, but, instead, let them think through their own responses. This is usually a better way for them to make real and lasting discoveries about God.

2. Be grateful for every answer.

Leaders can also stifle discussion by making students feel stupid about their responses and comments. Your job is to create a safe place for kids to say whatever they want and be appreciated for it. Sure, you'll need to gently redirect the tangents that pop up every three minutes. But it's better to encourage freedom of speech. Your kids will trust you (and themselves) more.

3. Don't be satisfied with the first response to your question.

Avoid setting a question-answer-question-answer pattern. Ask for several responses to your question, then provoke the speakers to dialogue with each other. That is, move them from merely answering toward discussing or conversing with each other, not just with you. Start the ball rolling by asking "Why do you think that?" and "What do the rest of you think?"

4. Keep the discussion moving.

A Relig class that does not move along at a good pace tends to get dull. Notice when kids are starting to lose interest, then quickly move on to the next question.

5. Be alert to the individuals in your group.

Be aware of what's going on with your kids as they come to your small group. Reserve the first few minutes of your small group for small talk and sharing. During your Relig class, notice when a student begins speaking, but stops. Look beyond those who are monopolizing the discussion, and deliberately ask other, quieter students for their responses. You'll never stop some personalities from standing out in your group; others will insist on staying in the background. That's okay. Your goal is to make every student feel that he or she is an important member of your group, whether or not that person contributes a lot to the discussion.

6. Don't be afraid of silence.

If your question gets no immediate response from a student, don't feel you have to jump in and answer it yourself. Let the question sit for a while. Silence is often an answer in itself- or can be preceded by a deeply felt response. If every question you ask is met with prolonged silence, you may need to take a hard look at the kinds of questions you're asking.

7. Turn tough questions back to the group.

The very tough question can be give you a chance to get a lively discussion going. Don't think you have to try to answer it- try turning the question back to the group instead: " Good question. What do the rest of you think?" The students will be encouraged to think for themselves rather than to look to you for answers. If a question remains unresolved, now and then challenge your small group to find the answer by your next meeting.

8. Let your group self-correct its tangents.

Turning a question back to the group is also a remedy for wild tangents. Ask, "What do the rest of you think?" As students give their input, the group will correct itself. This also encourages your students to dialogue with each other instead of directing their dialogue toward you.

9. Stay flexible to the group's needs.

A student may come to the Relig meeting with a specific, significant, and often immediate concern that needs to be addressed in the small group. It may be an unresolved conflict between group members, a friend (perhaps there that night) who wants to know more about Christ, a recent death, a divorce. Put aside your agenda and deal with the issue. This shouldn't happen every week, however. Decide when an issue is sufficiently critical that you need to deal with it instead of leading your planned discussion.

10. Be prepared to learn from your group.

This is the best part of leading a small group. Your weekly preparation, as well as the students' feedback, can deeply influence your own spiritual development. It breeds maturity, and being a Relig leader will nurture your spiritual life as well as the spiritual lives of your students.