

WORKING WITH DIFFERENT PERSONALITIES

Your challenge as a small group leader is to learn to work with the personalities in your small group and help all your students grow individually even as they learn to function as a group.

These are 5 types of student personalities, most of which you'll meet in a typical Relig group. The aim isn't to stereotype students, but to show you common traits and characteristics you'll encounter in your small group and then to help you find ways to minister more effectively to them.

The Talker

This is the student in your small group who never stops talking, who always has a comment for everything. You're tempted to apply duct tape, but don't there are more productive ways to handle this student. First, position the Talker next to you when you begin your group, which reduces eye contact with her when you ask a question and, when she interrupts someone, lets you reach over and touch her arm (usually a silent but effective cue). If you have a whole group of Talkers, you may want to try the ground rule that stipulates that the small group must circulate an object—a stuffed animal, Nerf Ball, whatever and that a student must possess it before speaking. This will help Talkers wait their turn.

The Talker probably has some natural leadership ability that you should encourage. So let them lead the small group now and then. This can help them appreciate what you endure as a leader, and they just may become more supportive when you lead. If the problem persists, get some time alone with them and talk about giving others a chance to answer the questions. Help him or her feel that they're on your team, and that the two of you need to work together to encourage the other students to respond.

The Thinker

This student is quieter (and usually shier) than the others, with a tendency to get drowned out by the louder personalities in your group. So bring him out more by positioning him across from you, to increase the chances of eye contact with you. You can also occasionally direct questions to specific students, thereby eliciting responses from the Thinker.

If the Thinker is particularly shy, spend one-on-one time with him to discover what he's interested in— and so you can create the kinds of questions that will bring him into the discussion. Use the positive reinforcement of affirming him on those occasions when he actually does respond publicly. And when he lapses back into silence, don't interpret that silence as something that needs to be fixed. Some kids just learn best by listening & watching.

The Distracter

This is the student who can't sit still and ends up distracting everyone in your small group, including you. Rather than constantly stifling him, direct his energy toward productive ends: ask him to help you pass things out, set up chairs, serve refreshments. Do some active learning experiences with your small group— like service projects —instead of just sitting and talking week after week.

You may better understand this student (and where his energy comes from) if you get together with him outside of your small group. Even a Distracter can be good for your small group, if only because he doesn't let you get by with boring sessions (Remember that when you're tempted to quit.) Your leadership skills will be sharpened as you find ways to engage him as well as the tranquil students in your lesson.

The Debater

She irritates you by challenging every point you (or anyone else) tries to make. Sure, she brings a creative energy to the group sometimes but she often stifles the other kids by making them feel too threatened to voice their opinions or feelings. Deal with the Debater by establishing ground rules for your small group, the first (and perhaps the only) being: It's okay to disagree with opinions, but it is inappropriate to attack or put down other small group members if their opinions differ from yours. A second ground rule may be that only one person may talk at a time. Ground rules like these help make a Debater's criticism less caustic and restrains her from interrupting others in order to make her point. Once Debaters understand & abide by such rules, their input can actually enliven your discussion. Remember that your goal is to direct, not stifle, their participation.

The Crisis Producer

This student is in perpetual crisis— and lets your small group know about it every meeting. He's often self-absorbed and therefore unable to participate in the discussion, except when it's focused on him. So get together with him before your small group begins in order to talk through his problems with just you instead of bringing them to the small group. Or begin your small group discussion with the assurance that everyone will have a chance to share problems, prayer requests, etc., at the end of the group. This helps members— and especially Crisis Producers stay focused on your session.

Whatever your strategy with your Crisis Producer, your long goal is to help him see past his crises to some solutions, and then to participate in your small group without having to constantly bring the focus back to himself. What about a student who raises a legitimate crisis during the discussion? Be flexible enough to postpone your study and deal with the issue at hand.