

SMALL GROUP FACILITATION

Small groups are a key part of every Life Night. It is during this time that the youth are given an opportunity to discuss what they learned during the Proclaim. With the guidance of the small group leader, they are able to take the message of the teaching and apply it to their own lives.

It is important during small groups to create an atmosphere where the teens feel free and open to discuss their thoughts. They will only articulate their feelings of how the teaching challenges them, upsets them, pushes them, affects them, or convicts them if they feel comfortable. In order to create this type of an environment, keep the following things in mind.

It is imperative with teenagers that the transition from the Proclaim to the Break is smooth and swift. If they are unsure of where to go, or if it takes them a while to get into their small groups, they may lose focus and thus you lose momentum for the discussion.

To continue with this smooth transition, it is key that the Core Members are prepared to lead the small group discussions. Make sure that the Core Members are not only familiar with the topic that was just taught during the Proclaim, but also that they have looked over the small group questions ahead of time. Also, if there is any sort of small group activity, make sure to have all the needed supplies before the small group time starts.

Starting in prayer is a great way to not only invite God into the discussions, but to also set the tone for the small groups. Choosing who starts in prayer is up to the discretion of the small group leader. It is a good idea to have a Core Member start the prayer for the first few Life Nights until you get a feeling for the youth in your particular group. If you decide to have a middle school youth open in prayer it is usually best to not put them on the spot. Ask them the week before if they would like to lead prayer next week, or just ask if any youth wants to open in prayer.

One small thing that can make a huge difference is how you sit in your small groups. It is best to all be on the same level, including the small group leader. That means if one person is sitting in a chair, everyone should be sitting on a chair. Essentially it will help with the small group discussion if everyone is at the same eye level and feels comfortable.

All of these little things as you enter into your time in small groups can really help to set the tone and set up the small group time for success.

Small groups is not a time for the leader to finish the teaching or to talk about their own opinions about the teaching. It is also not a time for a question and answer directed at the small group leader. It is **a time for the youth to respond and reflect the small group leader is only there to help guide and facilitate the discussion and activities.** If you are struggling with the behavior of certain youth in your group there are a few simple things to do. You can sit in between two youth if they are being disruptive, if you have only one youth responding tell them that their opinion is important but that you want to hear from other youth. If you are having a hard time getting a response at all, give the youth a few minutes to think of an answer to the question and then go around in a circle and have each youth respond. Do not be afraid to send a youth to the youth minister if they are being disrespectful or are too much to handle.

It is always important during the small group discussions and activities to keep relational ministry in mind. This time is just as much about building relationship with the middle school youth as it is helping them grasp the main ideas from the Proclaim. Encourage the small group leaders to learn the names of the youth in their group and to pray for them and their intentions throughout every week – it is also good to tell the youth that they have been praying for them so that they know how much they matter and that they are remembered.

Small groups is a time of sharing our faith, our hearts, and our experiences – thus small groups should always be a place free of judgment where the youth feel safe sharing their thoughts. Make sure that the youth have common respect for each other and know that it is not okay to turn what someone shared in small groups into gossip around school or the youth group.

Once you have mastered these basics of small groups and have a handle on your groups behavior and participation, it is time to take it to the next level. It is important to **continually challenge you small group by taking them deeper into their discussion**. Ask them to share more than one word answers and to really explain what they are thinking. A lot of times too youth know what you want to hear and will share that rather than what they really think, as you build relationships if you suspect this continue to encourage the to share their own unique thoughts.

Also **do not be afraid of silence**, while it may feel awkward at times the youth may just need some extra time to formulate their thoughts. The more you can foster in them confidence in their thinking the more they will continue to open up as you challenge them.

As you continue on and continue to grow as a small group and in confidence as a small group leader, remember that not every small group time has to bring about conversion or incredible discussion. There may be times that you have horrible small group experiences or really challenging youth. It is in these times that we must not be discouraged or give up and realize that each youth that has been put in our paths is there for a reason and we are called to lead them to Christ. Remember to be patient with them and to continue to do the best to your ability and know that if you stick with it and work with them in patience and love you will allow God to do what He needs to in their lives and their hearts.

THE DO'S AND DON'TS OF FACILITATING SMALL GROUPS

THE DO'S

- Start small group time in prayer.
- Remind everyone that what is said is not to be repeated outside of the small group.
- Use fun opening questions to help the youth get to know each other more.
- Use small group questions to help facilitate discussion and conversation.
- Include everyone in the conversation.
- Hold back some of the stronger personalities through positive acknowledgement, and stating a desire to hear what others have to share.
- Try different strategies to help shier youth participate such as going around in the circle to let everyone share an answer.
- Always be attentive and listen to what the youth have to say.
- Affirm and thank the youth for sharing.
- Do not be afraid to allow times of silence.
- Read through the small group discussion and activity plans before the Life Night.
- Have all the necessary materials for small group activities before small groups start.
- Ask the Holy Spirit to lead the discussion, and if you get off topic gently guide the youth back to some of the small group questions.

THE DON'TS

- Do not give another teaching or finish the teaching with what you think should have been said.
- Do not dominate the conversation; this is not a time to share all your opinions and advice but to let the youth respond.
- Do not just power through the small group questions, or feel pressured to make it through the whole list.
- Do not just let one youth respond or a few dominate the whole small group time, be sure to hear at least once from every youth.
- Do not allow or permit taunting or bullying of any kind.
- Do not be unprepared, the youth will know.