

SMALL GROUP BASICS

1. Start Light- Get Deeper

It's that simple. In most small groups you don't want to sit down, look at the kid sitting across the circle and ask, "So what's the biggest sin you committed this week?" In other words, don't start off with deep or vulnerable questions that could close doors before you even get to the front porch. Start with light questions that people want to answer.

In 9 out of 10 small groups, I start with the question, "What is your name and your favorite kind of pizza?" I've never met a kid that didn't want to answer that un-intimidating question. The idea is to bring up something that is fun to share. A few examples:

- What is your name and favorite kind of pizza?
- Share your name and the pet you would have if you could have any animal tamed in the world.
- Tell us your name and your favorite thing to do on a Friday night.
- Share your name and what you want for your next birthday.
- What is your name and what kind of car would you want if I had millions of dollars and would buy it for you.

So the first part of "starting light" is asking that first fun question. Now most of us usually have a topic that we need to discuss, so we need to segue into that conversation. I usually do that by asking another fun, non-embarrassing question, but about the topic.

At this point, students will have answered two easy questions and are in a positive momentum toward sharing answers. People like to be heard and if the small group has done it's job, it's members will feel comfortable and feel safe to proceed into deeper conversation.

At this point, I slowly get deeper with my questions as students feel comfortable opening up. The questions get deeper, maybe even more personal and more toward the heart of the topic.

Let's look at an example of the order in which I would ask questions in my small group:

EXAMPLE (the topic friendship)

1. Share your name and favorite kind of pizza.
2. Describe a good memory you have with a friend.

3. What qualities do you look for in a friend?
4. What qualities do you avoid in a friend?
5. Which of these qualities is something you might need to work on?

In this example you can see how the order progresses towards number 5. You can also picture that if you started off a small group with question 5, "All right, share your name and what friendship qualities you need to work on!" You might have trouble getting people to open up.

Start light, making it easy and comfortable for students to share, then slowly get deeper, creating a safe atmosphere where students want to open up and share their heart.

2. Create clearly defined boundaries, rules and expectations.

Another good principle in running a small group is laying out boundaries, rules and expectations. This doesn't mean lay out the ten commandments the first time you meet, just voice your expectations- your direction. Many students have no clue what a small group is, don't assume they know. I took "unchurched" students to church and youth group for years. I loved watching how they reacted to many of the "churchy" phrases that we use and think they understand. I'll never forget one time that I brought a group of students and near the end of the evening the person up front said "now it's time to form our small groups." A couple of my students looked at me with scared looks on their faces. "What are 'small groups?'"

I told them that each week they just divided into groups of about 8 to 10.

My students looked at me skeptically. "What do they do?"

Don't assume that students know what we're doing. Tell them what you hope to accomplish by meeting together in a smaller group. Communicate your expectations for attendance, for participation, and even touch on conduct. I'll talk more about this in the "TIPS" section below.

3. Aim for a clear purpose.

Another one of the small group basics is knowing your purpose. Frequently I ask youth workers what their purpose is for small groups. Many of them have trouble explaining exactly what their purpose is. Reason being, THEY DON'T KNOW! Know your purpose for your small groups. Do you want to simply provide an arena in which students can learn the material in a way other than from "up front?" If that's the case, then your purpose would be the understanding of the

material, your focus would be the topic. If your purpose is to deepen the relationships in the group, you might have a topic, but your purpose would be to provide a discussion that would motivate kids to open up and share their hearts with each other, increasing their level of trust and vulnerability with their small group members and leader.

4. LISTEN!

It's simple . . . it's basic . . . it's often neglected, but it's one of the most important reasons for even having a small group . . . to give student's an opportunity to open up and feel heard. Notice I didn't say "be heard"but "FEEL heard." Steven Covey calls this type of listening "empathetic listening" in his book "7 Habits of Highly Effective People." Steven argues that this kind of listening is more than just "active listening," repeating back what you heard, and communicating positive non-verbal signals. Empathetic listening seeks to understand the feelings and emotions behind the person. This is so very necessary in our work with teens. The walls that teens put up are often thick and hard to break open. A staff person who doesn't "empathetically listen" can easily miss what's really going on inside a teen.

5. Group Size Determines Outcome

The last small group basic is not only an observation, it's a fact. As group size grows, impact shrinks. Now, before you get your feathers all ruffled, think about it. The more people you have in a group, the less each individual has an opportunity to be heard. As the group size gets bigger, trust in the group gets smaller, and people will open up less. The less people open up, the less they will grow. Read more about this below when we take . . . "A Deeper Look at Small Groups?"

5 TIPS TO GUARANTEE INEFFECTIVE SMALL GROUPS

(5 ludicrous tips, each followed by the real answer)

That's right- if you're going to mess up- mess up BIG TIME! Do these 5 tips and your small groups will suffer immensely.

1. Don't have any small group rules! Let them talk all at once, thrash on each other and disrespect you.

Seriously folks! Introduce the small group as a time to express ourselves and hear from each other. But to do that we need **two rules: Be honest & respect others.** I always tell the group that I'm looking forward to hearing from them, and then I get specific. I say, "That means when Jenny is talking, we all listen. Then when we talk, Jenny's going to listen to us!"

Part of respecting other members of the groups means being confidential with what's shared in the group. Don't be afraid to express this. Let people know that what they share is safe in the group and won't be joked about with others later.

The younger the group, the more you have to establish the rules. Regardless, it's good to remind people about respecting each other. You can get as detailed as necessitated by the group.

2. Don't give everyone an opportunity to answer each question! As soon as a couple people speak out just move on to the next question.

Really now! Give everyone in the group an opportunity to respond to each question. After you ask a question- go around the circle and ask each person what they think? Some small group leaders like to affirm that it's okay to "pass" or abstain from answering. I choose not to offer "passing" as an option. I find that if students know they can simply "pass," it's an easy way out of having to open up. If the subject matter is deep, then I make it a point to read non-verbal signals and make sure students aren't put on the spot.

3. Talk a lot! Always finish their sentences for them and give long examples from your own life that illustrates the point you're talking about.

Come on! You've got two ears and one mouth . . . use them proportionally. This isn't our chance that we've been waiting for to PREACH to a captive audience (or an audience held captive in most cases). If your group is having trouble sharing or talking, don't blabber on. Ask the question in a different way. Give examples of possible answers. Sometimes it helps if you answer first. Just answer as a member of the group- don't start preaching. Remember, this is their opportunity to feel free to open up and feel heard!

4. Whip through the questions! See how fast you can finish your small group and get to free time.

Not a good idea! It's not bad to allow someone to expand on a question. Ask "why?" to some answers- there is no need to rush through answers. The small group leader sets the pace of the group. If the leader promotes small quick answers, that's what the group will give. I'm not asking you to draw things out and run them into the ground- just don't miss an opportunity for someone to open up because they feel like the group doesn't allow adequate time for going deep. This isn't a race to see who's small group finishes first. Make sure you give everyone a chance to answer and really share their feelings on the subject.

5. Don't prepare a wrap up. Just share what you think of at the moment- besides, God will give you what you need to say.

Seriously! Prepare your wrap up as best as you can before hand. (The wrap up may be done when you pull together as a large group- if that is your format.) These groups are designed to raise questions and provide a direction for answers. We don't want an unclear wrap up creating any more confusion. The wrap up should always point to the answer that God gives us as well as direction to find more about it. Being prepared doesn't hinder the Spirit's leading. I think the Holy Spirit is big enough to lead you when you prepare!

A DEEPER LOOK AT SMALL GROUPS

We've gone over small group basics and some quick tips. But let's step back and look a little deeper at this thing we call a small group. Small groups are a very effective tool that many youth workers use to provide some of the above results. But, what really is a small group?

The term "SMALL GROUPS" is used loosely by youth workers. I've seen a lot of different "creations" labeled SMALL GROUPS. Some are very organized and defined- so much so- that if someone else runs a small group a different way they are looked down upon. Many youth workers simply use small groups as a format for part of their program. There might be a time for the large group together, then a time when the group is divided, hence the name "small groups." Others might refer to their Bible studies or "Care Groups" as "small groups." Then there are those who create an actual ministry model called "small groups" which isn't merely a part of a program- it IS the program and has a specific purpose.

Doug Fields' Definition

Doug Fields touches on this in his book "Purpose Driven Youth Ministry." If you haven't read his book, GO BUY IT! It's available at most Christian book stores and it has plenty of good ideas, examples, and, most importantly, principles that guide you as you cast vision for your youth ministry. Doug argues that a group of 15 is not a small group. Now I've heard many youth workers claim that their youth group is a "small group," which is understandable since the average youth group in America has 12 regular attending youth. Doug contends that 15 students is actually a "crowd" and a group of 4 or 5 kids is optimum for true "small groups."

That's fine and dandy for groups with a good staff to student ratio, but youth worker after youth worker asks me, "What if I have 30 kids, 3 staff, INCLUDING ME AND MY WIFE, and I need to divide into 'small groups?' Should I just tell 15 kids to leave?"

Good question. I'm not going to answer it! Answering that question is working backwards. Let's see what type of small group we want, then let's figure out what is possible with the resources and staff we have (or need to develop).

3 Types of Small Groups

Doug adequately defends his above statement with a description of three types of small groups. These descriptions are worth looking at, each level with a different degree of impact.

Level 1 small groups:

These are the types of groups that are simply part of the program. A large group program meets together and, at a specific time, breaks up into small groups. People are randomly placed in these groups. There is no consistency from meeting to meeting and no accountability established. Doug contends that the impact of these groups is low. It's simply a means to an end- a necessary part of a program, not a catalyst to students building deeper relationships with each other.

Level 2 Small Groups:

These type of groups also meet as a part of the program. These groups, however, have the same students each week, thus having a medium level of consistency. Students have a chance to interact with the same students each week. But, again, the purpose is to get through a given set of questions or to discuss a certain topic. The level of impact is much higher. Relationships can deepen, and depending on the small group leader, some accountability will be encouraged.

Level 3 Small Groups:

These types of small groups focus more on the students than the teaching. Content might be a starting place for discussion, but the focus is on building relationships and accountability. Here, the small group IS the program. The goal isn't to get bigger- but to grow deeper.

Handling Growth In Numbers

So, back to the question about how to handle large numbers. First I think you need to ask yourself what kind of group you want to run? If you're running what Doug calls a Level 1 small group, I don't think the difference between a group of 5 and 10 is going to have a drastic effect. As you up the level of accountability and focus on relationship building, each individual over 5 or 6 students, may take away from the whole of the group.

So does this mean that we shouldn't try to attract new students to youth group? (That sounds like an Apostle Paul question- let me give you an Apostle Paul answer) May it not be! Don't ever stop reaching out to new students. I must admit, however, Doug's Level 3 small groups produce a rather large hurdle: *the youth worker needs to be pro-active about consistently recruiting and developing new small group leaders to form new groups with new students.*

Bo Boshers, director of student ministries at Willow Creek Community Church in Chicago has an interesting approach to this dilemma that he outlines in his book "Student Ministry for the 21st Century." Bo suggests that every small group is made up of a leader and an apprentice leader. This apprentice leader gets on-the-job-training as the group grows and develops. Then as the group gets too big, the group can split and the apprentice leader can lead his or her own group.

I've heard a number of people voice worries about splitting a group. It can be hard. But I look at it like a church plant. The church owns, from the beginning, that it wants to grow (in depth) and expand (in numbers). If this is owned from the beginning, then the group is ready- not always excited, but ready for this.

Making "Reaching" a Priority

Since Bo's idea builds apprentice leaders into his small groups, this allows him to make it a goal to expand the groups size, hoping the group will grow big enough to launch the new small group. How can we make our groups expand in number?

Bo uses a tool called "the empty seat." The small group leader teaches the value of evangelism from the first day of the group. The group owns the idea of bringing new friends or "seeking" individuals into the group. Weekly, the group touches on or prays for who each person can bring to fill the "empty seat."

This "empty seat" philosophy is very much like the Billy Graham Organization's "Operation Andrew." People pray for three friends in which they can bring to the Billy Graham Crusade. These types of tools are great because they teach individuals to pray for their lost friends, seek out opportunities to invite their friends to a comfortable atmosphere where they can hear the Gospel, and be involved hands-on with the evangelism process.

Bottom Line

So what do I do now? Good question. Here's the process:

1. Research

If you're reading this, then you're all ready on your way. You're checking out what other youth leaders with small group leadership experience think and have learned over the years. Don't stop here. Check out more books like Doug's and Bo's. Find out what others have done that works.

2. Rub Shoulders

Find youth workers in your area that run small group ministries. Take them out to lunch and pick their brains. Ask them questions about the issues we've discussed on this page. Visit their small groups and notice what they do that works . . . and doesn't.

3. Pray

Pray for God to give you guidance through this process. Seek out the direction He's leading you in your ministry. If you feel like he's speaking to you about evangelism lately, then maybe you want to consider an idea like Bo's with the empty seat.

4. Let Your Team Own the Decision

In John Maxwell's book, "21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership," he introduces *The Law of Solid Ground*. In this law of leadership, he contends that you don't make major decisions by yourself and drop them like a bomb as a command for your leaders to follow. Include your leaders in this process. Have them own the decision with you so that they will be excited about it and carry it out with as

much passion as you have.

5. Remember the Basics

Many of the methods people use are opinion, but don't forget the hard facts. Certain truths remain and must be considered when implementing your small group program. Keep in mind the fact that the larger the group, the less chance an individual has to develop trust in and open up to the group. Keep in mind that this is not an arena for leaders to preach. Know these truths and let them guide you through this process.