

Tips for Facilitating Groups

January 2024



SOROPTIMIST INTERNATIONAL OF THE AMERICAS, INC.

Facilitating groups – especially groups of girls – may be intimidating to some volunteers at first. Use the tips below when facilitating group discussions to ensure meaningful sessions.

When choosing Dream It, Be It curriculum facilitators, think about the following:

- Facilitators could be volunteers, or other community members.
- It is helpful – but not necessary – to have previous experience working with teens.
- Some comfort and/or experience leading group discussions is helpful.
- Being a good listener is critical to facilitating groups.
- Having an upbeat, positive attitude is necessary to get adolescent girls excited to participate.
- The ability to be open and honest will help adolescent girls develop trust.
- Facilitation is meant to bring out the ability of a group to accomplish a goal; it is not to direct, lecture, or do for others.

Before the session begins:

- Try to prepare as much as possible. Read and re-read the curriculum and the order of activities. Refer to the 'Ten Tips for a Successful Project' for other ideas on how to prepare.
- Brainstorm some strategies to enact if something doesn't go according to plan. Remember, you don't need to be an expert on an issue; it's not important that you have all the answers. Rather, as a facilitator, your job is to guide participants through a process of exploring. One strategy to rely on when asked a question from a participant (whether or not you have an answer) is to pose the question to the entire group of participants by asking "What do you all think?" This strategy creates a great opportunity for participants to share their knowledge with one another and alleviates the need for the facilitator to be the 'expert.'
- Set aside an adequate amount of preparation time to ensure all needed materials are present and set up according to the instructions in the curriculum.

During the session:

- Post the session agenda somewhere in the room and/or review it with participants.
- Explain the goals of the session. Participants should know why they are doing something and what they can expect as the result from the activity.
- Use positive body language - look at people when they are talking, use your hands freely to aid in your presentation, smile, etc. Participants will respond to your enthusiasm, respect and encouragement.
- Be as clear as possible when explaining rules and directions before beginning the activity. Ask if there are any questions. Announce how much time participants have for an activity ("You have 5 minutes to make your list") and remind them when the time is about to end ("You have 1 minute left to finish your task").
- When leading group discussion, don't volunteer your own opinion. Stay objective and let the group carry out the conversation. Try not to show agreement or disagreement to any comments. If there is time, you can add your perspective at the end when you wrap up the discussion.
- Encourage and provide opportunities for participation from all group members. Support the ideas of others through empathy and positive reinforcement.

- There may be participants who constantly dominate the conversation, and those who rarely offer responses. Pay attention to this group dynamic. Address with prompts such as:
 - Does anyone who hasn't had a chance to speak yet want to add anything?
 - (Name), what do you think? (directed to participant who hasn't spoken)
 - Thank you, (Name). I'm going to call on someone who we haven't heard from in a while (directed to participant who is dominating conversation).
- Silence is okay – don't rush to fill it. When engaging with adolescent girls, they may appear disinterested or be slow to respond. They might not wish to appear foolish in front of their peers, or they might need more time to process their thoughts. When silence occurs after a question, you can wait patiently until someone volunteers a response, repeat or rephrase the question, or change the question altogether.
- A participant may share a personal experience and the group may not know what to do with the shared information, or how to respond to it. If this situation occurs, you may address it in various ways:
 - Validate her experience by saying "That sounds like it was difficult/challenging/upsetting, etc. to you" so she feels heard. You can then ask the participant to hold onto her thought and explain that you are happy to talk with her more about her experience after the session. Confirm that plan is okay with her before proceeding with the discussion.
 - Validate her experience (as stated above) and then invite a co-facilitator to talk more with the participant in private right then.
 - Validate her experience (as stated above) and move on, but later find a natural break in conversation to allow all participants to take a deep breath. Acknowledge the challenging conversation, thank participants for their honest participation, and pause for a deep breath or quick stretch to "reset" the group.
- If things aren't going according to the curriculum, don't worry. The participants don't know what you were planning, so if you forgot something or mess something up, it is not a major problem.
Your job is not to guarantee a perfect experience, but rather to provide participants with opportunities to share, experience, and grow.

Seek Out Training

If volunteers feel uncomfortable about their ability to facilitate, it might be useful to reach out to community partners who have experience working with girls in secondary school. You can connect with a school guidance counselor or social worker, or the staff of community organizations that serve adolescents to request a training session that will help volunteers better understand group facilitation as well as many of the issues that adolescent girls currently face. Many adolescent girls deal with unhealthy relationships, eating disorders and other body image issues, cyber bullying, cutting, estranged families, drug and alcohol abuse, etc. While some of these issues may be mentioned in the course of Dream It, Be It, it is not necessary for you to know how to address each of these issues. If an issue does arise, facilitators should respond in a compassionate and respectful manner, and then refer the participant to a trained professional such as a school guidance counselor, school social worker, or a counselor or therapist at a local community organization (see 'Provide Resources' below).

Provide Resources

It is recommended that you prepare a handout with contact information for school guidance counselor(s) and local community resources. Include the names, phone numbers, and email addresses of all contacts. If a girl does bring up an issue that is of concern during a session, please check in with her privately during or after the session. During your conversation, provide her with the handout containing contact information for school and local counselors and encourage her to talk more with one of the trusted adults included on the handout.