

## Practicing the Skills of Effective Small-Group Discussion



See this lesson in action on page 220.

➔ **TIP:** For your youngest learners, read a nonfiction piece out loud to one small inquiry group and have them write or draw their thoughts during and after the reading. Facilitate a fishbowl discussion as other class members watch. Stop the discussion after a few minutes and ask others what they noticed the fishbowl group did well; have them jot their thoughts on an anchor chart. Add any important things you noticed that they didn't catch. And now for the fun—give each group a chance to share a bad example with the class.

**WHEN and WHY:** From the beginning of the year, kids must join in sustained, focused, and balanced small-group discussions. This means kids must listen carefully, take turns, and monitor their own participation. Since few of us are born with these skills, we must teach them explicitly, early, and often.

**INITIATE:** "We are going to be working a lot in groups this year, and we need to get really good at talking to each other. So let's practice discussing."

**TEACH/MODEL:** Find a short, high-interest article or story and have everyone read it, using their best comprehension strategies to mark the text with their thinking, reactions, and questions. Then ask a volunteer group of kids to fishbowl a small-group discussion about the article.

*"The rest of you, your job is to observe carefully and make notes on what the fishbowl kids are doing well. What do they do to make their discussion fun and interesting?"*

Typically kids will notice that members

- |                                |                                 |
|--------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| get right to work              | ask questions                   |
| listened to each other         | share the airtime               |
| take turns and don't interrupt | support their opinions          |
| build on others' ideas         | disagree, but in a friendly way |

**GUIDED PRACTICE:** Now, ask kids to meet in their small groups and prepare to role-play a *bad* discussion, using the same article. (Kids love doing this.) Invite several groups to perform their version, since different distracting, annoying, or off-task behaviors will emerge. Expect to see behaviors like these:

- |                               |                                   |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| not being prepared            | being mean                        |
| interrupting                  | dominating the discussion         |
| getting up and walking around | disrespecting others' ideas       |
| sleeping, gossiping           | shuffling papers, tapping pencils |

**COLLABORATIVE PRACTICE:** Create a classroom chart that makes explicit the ingredients of successful small-group work by having kids fill in both positive and negative examples for each social skill category, as on page 47. They can continue to add to this chart through the year.

Harvey + Daniels (2009). *Comprehension + Collaboration*.  
Heinemann, Portsmouth NH