

The Introduction Session

Let's walk through a very important session, The Introduction.

Developing community guidelines or rules within the group is crucial to holding a safe, trusting and healthy learning environment for all Participants. Allowing the Participants to create their own rules conveys the expectation that the group will operate as a community and makes them more willing to abide by them. Make your expectations clear. Before beginning the program, decide what will be cause for disciplinary action.

Consider the following questions before meeting with your group:

- What does a "safe space" look like for your group?
- What actions will be in place for behavior management? i.e., incentives, diversion techniques

Length of Activity: 60 minutes

What to expect

Be prepared to answer many questions. Keep in mind that there may be many Participants who have never been a part of a program like Project ROOTS. Not all program Participants will immediately feel comfortable with the group or you; therefore, it is important to be understanding of everyone, by allowing them to share and join the discussion as they feel comfortable.

Materials

While the materials may vary from activity to activity, there are a few basic materials that are recommended for each session, including:

- Daily attendance sheet
- A binder containing Participant permission slips and other important forms
- Pencils/Pens
- Project ROOTS community guidelines
- Questions/comments box
- Small pieces of paper for the questions/comments box submissions

Discussion summary

The purpose of the introductory session is to give all new and returning Participants a uniform understanding of the program and its expectations as well as an overview of the program content. The first day should stress the concept of a "safe space" reminding the group that confidentiality is key.

Procedure

Step 1—Icebreaker

This is particularly important on the first day! You want your group to have fun and look forward to future sessions. This is the perfect opportunity for you to show the group that this is not a stringent or typical classroom setting. Ensure every member has the opportunity to introduce themselves by name to the group and most importantly, have fun!

Example: Bubble Pop Icebreaker

This game is messy fun and is best if played outside! Picnic tables or a grassy area would be an ideal setting to play this game. Each Participant will sit in front of a paper plate topped with whipped cream with their hands behind their back. Under the whipped cream there will be a hidden piece of unwrapped bubble gum. The Participants will race to find the bubble gum and compete to be the first to blow their piece of gum into a bubble. For a group of about 20, you will need at least three bottles of whipped cream.

Please refer to the Icebreakers Activities section on page 9 for more ideas.

Step 2—Facilitator role

It is recommended that the Facilitator share with the group why they chose to facilitate the group or why you like or believe in it. Share your goals and expectations for the year, and any exciting activities, guest speakers, or trips planned. Try to avoid sharing information that may be too personal to keep the focus on the program and always remain age appropriate!

Stress to the group that as a Facilitator, you are not there to lecture rather your goal is for everyone to participate and learn from one another.

Step 3—Program goals

Discuss the concept of a “safe space.” Let all Participants know that everything shared within the group will be kept private unless necessitated by law or the child’s request. For example, you may say, “What is said or shared in this room stays in this room. We will not share other people’s feelings or experiences with others that are not part of this group.”

But be sure to stress that as the Facilitator, your priority is always their safety which means that if they are in danger, you cannot keep that a secret, and rather you will initiate the process for the Participant to receive help.

Inform the group:

- There may be instances where uncomfortable topics are discussed but reassure them that you are always there for support and to answer any questions they may have.
- They may choose to opt out of an activity at any point

- In order to set the tone for a “safe space,” your first activity together will be setting community guidelines

Step 4—Program logistics

Be specific about the daily schedule of events. Explain the logistics of the program, such as the time and place that the group will be meeting.

Step 5—Set community guidelines

Allow Participants to draft and agree upon a set of community guidelines so that they are held accountable for following them. Consequences should also be shared with program Participants to uphold and reinforce transparency and honesty within the group. Once the community guidelines are established, review them frequently and post them in a visible location at the start of every session.

It is recommended that you retain structure while remaining flexible based on the needs of your Participants and the goals of the program. Facilitators should refrain from being overly harsh or stringent and keep in mind that outbursts or deviant behavior may be symptoms of a child who needs more opportunities for social emotional learning and removing them from the program may be counterproductive. Instead utilize potential outburst as an opportunity to showcase healthy conflict resolution, empathy and patience. Facilitators should not use fear and punishment to gain Participant compliance.

If there is a need for serious disciplinary action, follow the procedures of the host agency and remove the Participant from Project ROOTS to ensure the safety of the individual and others.

Potential disciplinary action may include:

- Having a one-on-one outside discussion with the Participant
Having the site director address the undesired behavior with the Participant
- Speaking with the Participant’s caregiver
- In extreme cases, dismissal from the program

Community guidelines can be both general and specific but should be concise and positive. **Stay away from guidelines that begin with “No”** and rather use guidelines such as:

- What happens here, stays here (Remind Participants that you may need to break this rule for their safety)
- Be respectful
- Raise your hand to speak
- Listen when someone is speaking
- Be kind
- Have fun
- Be confident, be yourself
- Include everyone
- Use appropriate words

- Clean up after yourself
- Keep your hands to yourself

Step 6—Feedback

Ask the Participants what they would like to gain or learn from the group and adapt your activities accordingly. This group is for their benefit, and if they are uninterested in the topics, they will not assume ownership of the group nor will they build a comradery. The goal is for Participants to feel empowered and to do this they must felt heard. Take suggestions and ideas and implement these ideas into future sessions to keep the group engaged.

Stay away from a classroom-like setting. A practical way to accomplish this is by having all the Participants sit in a large circle. If the space permits, allow Participants to sit on the floor or take off their shoes to set an inviting tone. Typical classroom settings with lined chairs are not recommended since sitting behind desks may immediately place the Facilitator in a lecturer role and thus discourage participatory learning. By having everyone sit at eye-level, including you as the Facilitator, it creates a personal space. The space should be clean and free of distractions; backpacks and other personal items should be neatly organized away from the group.