

# Discussion Guidelines

## (Excerpt from *The Solution Book*, Topic Booklet G)

### Discussions

Discussions can be a very important part of the school day. However, students must be taught how to behave during a discussion in order for a fruitful learning experience to occur. Discussions cannot be open-ended forums without rules or restrictions.

Discussions should have clear objectives. It's unreasonable to schedule discussions just for the sake of having a discussion. A discussion should be used to teach something. Its purpose may be as simple as teaching students how to engage in a discussion, or as complex as teaching students about the causes of war. The important thing to remember is that discussions will only be worthwhile if there is a clear educational objective.

### Guidelines for Preparing Discussions

**Decide on the rules for behavior.** The rules will vary from classroom to classroom. The younger the students, the more structured the discussion should be, and therefore, the rules should be very explicit. Discussions should be more structured, too, for older students who tend to misbehave frequently. If students are generally well behaved, even in relatively unstructured situations, discussion rules do not need to be as explicit. To design the rules for discussions, several questions must be answered. Work through each of the questions below to design your discussion rules.

***Should students be required to raise their hands and be called on by the teacher before they can speak?*** If your students are generally polite and well behaved, it may not be necessary to require them to raise their hands. However, if discussions are conducted without a hand-raising rule, more aggressive students will generally speak more frequently than those who are a little shy about jumping into a discussion. The teacher should be doubly aware of quieter students who seem to be ready to contribute to the discussion. In some cases, the teacher may wish to call on these students to ensure that they get a turn to speak. If you feel a hand-raising rule is not necessary, then the following discussion rule might suffice:

*"If you wish to say something, wait until the other person has finished talking. If more than one person wants to say something, let the person who has been waiting the longest speak first."*

If students need more structure, require them to raise their hands and wait to be called on. The rule might be similar to the following:

*"If you wish to say something, wait until the other person has finished talking. Then, quietly raise your hand. When the teacher calls on you, it is your turn to talk."*

***Is it necessary to have a discussion leader?*** If so, should this always be the teacher? If the students are respectful of each other, it may not be necessary to have a discussion leader. The teacher may get the discussion started and then let it take its own course. In most elementary classrooms, it is advisable to have a discussion leader to keep the group focused on the topic. If students are relatively mature, each discussion can be led by a different student appointed by the teacher. Students who lead discussions should get specific training on such topics as these:

- How to decide who gets to speak first if more than one student wants a turn.
- How to politely get the group back on the topic if the discussion loses focus.
- How to handle student misbehavior.
- How to handle a student who dominates the discussion.

If learning to handle these problems would be beyond the abilities of most of your students, plan to lead the discussion yourself. Ideas on how to handle the problems listed above will be discussed in the section "Dealing with Misbehavior during Discussions."

If you decide to assign a discussion leader, design a rule that gives the leader authority to run the group; perhaps one like the following:

- During group discussions, follow the directions of the group leader.

***Should a rule be included about being polite and respectful of others?*** Even in classrooms where students are very mature and polite, a rule about how to interact with others is a good idea. Such a rule is especially crucial for students who have problems interacting positively. The rule might be something like this:

- Be polite and respect the opinions of others. It's fine to disagree, but always treat others with respect.

### Decide how much time to allot for

**discussions.** Generally speaking, discussions should be no longer than large-group presentations. Use the chart below as a guide for planning the length of discussions.

Kindergarten or first grade	5–15 minutes
Second grade or third grade	5–20 minutes
Fourth grade or fifth grade	5–25 minutes
Sixth grade	5–30 minutes

### Guidelines for Leading Discussions

**NOTE:** If students will be used as discussion leaders, they should be trained in the techniques described below. If the teacher is leading the discussion, he or she should also become familiar with the following techniques.

**Go over the rules with the students before the first few discussions.** If students have followed the rules during the first several discussions, then it's probably unnecessary to go over the rules before future discussions. However, review the rules periodically and always restate them if misbehavior has occurred in previous discussions.

**Present the objective of the discussion.** Many discussions fall flat because students are not aware of the teacher's purpose in holding the discussion. Students should know what they're supposed to accomplish. The discussion's purpose cannot always indicate a specific outcome, but it should at least be clear in its goals. Below are several example presentations. Notice that while all of them present an objective, some indicate that the discussion may not lead to a definite conclusion or plan of action.

*"The purpose of this sharing time is to give each student a chance to tell us a little about himself or herself."*

*"The purpose of this discussion is to talk about modifying the classroom rules. By the end of the 20-minute period, we should have a new set of rules."*

*"The purpose of this discussion is to explore reasons that some people are mean to each other. Let's see if we can't try to understand why some people act mean and others don't."*

*"The purpose of this discussion is to brainstorm ideas on how we might keep the school cafeteria neater. I want to hear as many ideas as possible. I will put all the ideas on the board. For now, we are not going to discuss any of the ideas, so if you*

*think someone's idea will not work, don't say anything. Later we will discuss what might work and what might not. For now, let's just get as many ideas on the board as possible."*

### Keep the discussion focused on the topic.

One of the biggest problems with discussions is that students often stray from the topic being discussed. When this happens, it's the discussion leader's responsibility to steer them back on course. This should be done politely, without calling attention to particular students. The following statement represents one way to get students back on the discussion topic:

*"I think that we're getting off the subject. The purpose of today's discussion is to talk about modifying the classroom rules. Does anyone have other ideas on how we should modify the rules?"*

**Keep the discussion moving.** The discussion leader should keep the pace of the discussion rapid and its topic interesting. The leader should appear to be interested and stimulated by the topic. If he or she seems bored with the topic, the participants will become bored.

**If the students aren't participating in the discussion, and several attempts to get the discussion going have failed, abandon it and go on to something else.** Just because 20 minutes have been scheduled for the discussion, the full 20 minutes do not have to be used. If students aren't interested in the topic, and the discussion leader cannot get them interested, it's time to go on to other activities. Whenever a discussion is scheduled, the teacher should plan a backup activity, in case the discussion doesn't get off the ground or doesn't last as long as was expected.

**Praise students frequently for following the discussion rules.** Students need to receive feedback concerning their behavior during the discussion. Provide feedback, in the form of praise, to students who are doing what is expected of them. Focus on behaviors that show cooperation and respect for the opinions of others. Unfortunately, because discussion periods are less structured than other classroom activities, some students think that it's okay to be rude to or ridicule other students during a discussion. Discourage this type of attitude by looking for and praising students who treat each other with respect. For example, if one student disagrees with another student in a manner that is polite and respectful, you might say something like:

*"Class, I'd like to point out that Ernie has disagreed with what Gina said, but he has done so politely. I appreciate the way that Ernie and Gina treat each other with respect, even though they disagree on an issue. Now, does anyone else have any ideas about how to . . . ?"*

### **Dealing with Misbehavior during Discussions**

**If a student begins to misbehave or breaks a discussion rule, praise students who are doing things the right way.** For example, if a student begins talking to his neighbor, notice some students who are behaving and say:

*"I appreciate how Polly and Sharon are listening quietly while someone else has the floor."*

This type of statement demonstrates that students won't get attention by misbehaving. Soon students will learn that they must be polite and cooperative during discussions.

**If a student breaks one of the discussion rules, the same strategy applies.** For example, if one student interrupts another student, calmly praise a student who has raised his or her hand and waited patiently to be called upon.

**If a student who is speaking breaks a discussion rule, ask the student to rephrase his or her statement.** For example, a student may disagree with another student in a way that implies that the other person is stupid. In a situation like this the teacher might say:

*"Ian, it's all right to disagree with what Neil has to say. However, the way in which you disagreed was not very respectful of Neil. Can you restate what you said, so that you disagree with Neil, but without putting him down?"*

If the student then gives an appropriate response, show your approval. If the student again gives an inappropriate response, model a correct response and go on with the discussion. After the discussion is over, determine whether or not the student's misbehavior is caused by not knowing how to disagree in a polite and respectful way. If this is the case, spend a few minutes each day role playing with the student.

*"Ian, I think we need to practice disagreeing with someone in a polite and respectful way. Let's pretend that I think we should have a rule about*

*not chewing gum in class, and you disagree with me. What could you say to me that would indicate your disagreement, yet still be respectful of me?"*

Begin with nonemotional topics and then move to topics you know the student has had difficulty with in the past. During role-playing sessions and class discussions, praise the student whenever he or she is able to comment in an appropriate fashion. If, however, the student still can't respond correctly, follow the procedures outlined on solution sheet 23, "Arguing—An Individual Argues with Classmates."

**If praising a student's good behavior and ignoring his or her bad behavior has been ineffective, remove the student from the discussion.** Have the student wait in the back of the room until the discussion has ended. See booklet C, "Correcting Misbehavior" for details on time-out procedures. If the student misbehaves in the back of the room, calmly inform the student that you're keeping track of the time he or she disrupts the group. The student will owe that much time off recess. Owing time is also discussed in detail in booklet C, "Correcting Misbehavior."

**If many students are misbehaving and praising students' appropriate behavior has not been effective, end the discussion.** Show students that having class discussions is a privilege, not a right. If the privilege is abused, the privilege is removed. Of course, this procedure must be carried out calmly. If the teacher appears to be angry, some students may feel that they've gained control of the situation because they've been able to control the teacher's emotions. If the procedure is carried out calmly, students will see that the discussion has ended because of their bad behavior, not because the teacher is angry. To end the discussion, you might say something like:

*"I'm sorry, class, but it's obvious that this group is not mature enough today to have a discussion. Please get out your math books. Perhaps if the class works very hard, we could try having another discussion tomorrow or the next day."*

Never scold students during a discussion. Keep your focus on positive behavior, and demonstrate that you also are following the rules about respect and cooperation.

**Summary of How to Prepare and Lead Discussions**  
**Design discussion rules.**

- Decide how much time to allot for discussion.
- Always present an objective for the discussion.
- Keep the discussion focused on the topic.
- Keep the discussion moving.
- If the discussion is not working, go on to something else.
- Praise students who are following the rules.

- If a student misbehaves, praise students who are behaving the right way.
- If a student misbehaves while speaking:
  - a. Have the student rephrase his or her comment.
  - b. Model an appropriate response.
  - c. Teach the student appropriate responses, or, if necessary, begin time-out procedures.
- If a number of students are misbehaving, end the discussion.