

Care for the Family's

Guide to Leading a Small Group

Care
for the
Family

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Care for the Family is regularly asked for advice about how to use its small group resources effectively. This guide has been written to help you get the best out of your group, and yourself as the group leader. If you are new to this role, there will be much here to help you on your way. If you're more experienced we still hope you will find some fresh ideas or reminders of good practice. Although the information below is to particularly help you when you are using Care for the Family resources, the principles are relevant for any small group work.

Obviously each group is unique and much will depend on the subject you are leading. For example you might be running *Parentalk* (a video based course) with a group of young mums that you know well, or setting up a new group to study *The Money Secret* book. Some groups will be on-going, for example a Single Parent Group, others may only meet for a limited number of sessions. The structure of the meetings for these will be very different yet the guiding principles to being an effective group leader are the same.

What is the role of a Small Group Leader (SGL)?

We are using the phrase 'small group leader' or 'SGL' (some people use the word facilitator), as it clearly defines the role you will be taking. When using Care for the Family resources we have found them to be most effective when the SGL maintains a balance between working through the material as a group peer, yet is also able to step back, lead and keep the group on track.

As the SGL it is your role to:

- Help a group develop
- Enable the effective working of the group
- Focus on group members
- Lead the group to a common goal

It is not your role to:

- Be an 'expert'
- Give definitive answers
- Dominate conversations
- Steer the group to agree with your own opinions

As you can see, it's more about attitude and aptitude rather than knowledge of the topic your group is studying/discussing. Below is a check-list. Read through and place a tick alongside the points you currently do well. It can be helpful to ask someone whose opinion you trust what they think. Work on developing the areas you haven't marked.

Check list for an effective SGL

- Sees each person as having worth and dignity in their own right
- Respects people enough not to intrude on their privacy
- Does not force people to speak
- Does not tell others to participate, but creates a situation in which they can
- Helps people communicate with one another

- Believes each member of the group has something worth saying
- Is a good listener
- Is patient and gently draws people out and assists them in becoming articulate
- Does not manipulate the members of a group to agree with or follow his/her ideas
- Helps the group focus on content and the group process
- Senses when things are not going well and is able to intervene
- Protects vulnerable members of the group
- Maintains control of the group process
- Is enthusiastic and engages with the group
- Does not expect to be a perfect SGL, but is willing to learn from each experience

How do groups develop?

From your own experiences of being in a small group, you will realise how the atmosphere and interaction at the first meeting is quite different from that of a few sessions in, or at the end of, a course. This is because a small group is a dynamic unit of individuals whose needs must be met in order for the group to be productive.

Individual's need

- A sense of belonging to the group
- Clear expectations of their role within the group
- Confidence in the leader
- A sense of progress

Stages of group development

Regardless of the fact that each small group you work with will be made up of very different people with their own personalities and characteristics, research* shows that they will usually develop as a unit in similar ways. In order for the group to reach its maximum effectiveness it will need to go through certain stages, which can be summed up as follows:

- **Forming** - Initial apprehension and uncertainty. Group members keep to 'safe' conversation, weigh each other up and are keen for acceptance. In order to move on to the next stage, each member must be prepared to leave their 'comfort zone'. The role of the SGL is to ensure a relaxed atmosphere, draw people into conversations without pressurising them and gain the group's trust.
- **Storming** - With the growth of discussion comes disagreement. This is healthy and shows that the group is moving on, although many SGLs worry when this happens. Some members will openly question and challenge or attempt to dominate; others will feel uncomfortable and remain completely silent. As a leader your role is to ensure that disagreements do not degenerate into personal attacks. Encourage members to listen to others' views and opinions, and to ensure that each person who wants to speak is able to.
- **Norming** - Group members acknowledge each other's contributions. They will compromise on areas of disagreement, challenge and be challenged without becoming defensive and are willing to change their own ideas or opinions. The group is open,

shares information and individuals have a sense of belonging to the group, so much so they may not want to break it up! The role of the SGL is to keep the group moving towards its goal.

- **Performing** - Not all groups reach this stage, but if they do the members will have reached a stage of interdependence on each other. They will be prepared to work in smaller groups, individually or as part of the larger unit. They instinctively know and adapt their own role to suit the needs of the whole group. The role of the SGL is to move them on to the final stage.

- **Adjourning** - This is the stage when the group ends or individuals leave. This can be a difficult time for group members who will often feel a sense of loss. The role of the SGL is to plan the conclusion, and recognise the input of the individuals and the achievement of the group. The SGL should also enable the group to say its farewells and decide how its members want to relate to each other in the future.

*Tuckerman, B (1965) *Developmental Sequence in Small Groups*

Making them feel comfortable

Venue

It may be that you have no control over the location of your small group, but there are some things you need to think about.

- Is it bright and welcoming?
- Does it have good heating and/or ventilation?
- Can you get good blackout if you are showing a video?
- Is it a venue most people would be happy to attend?
- Does it have easy access/parking/facilities for the disabled?
- Is it free from distractions?

Group Size

The best size for any small group is between 7 and 12 participants. Even with 12, there may be times when it will be better to break down into small groups of 3 - 5. This is especially helpful if you have a number of participants who are shy of speaking in a larger group.

Seating

Again, you may not have much control over the seating that you can use. But remember too comfy chairs might send someone watching a video off to sleep!

Position the chairs to enable as much interaction as possible. The best arrangement is circular with the SGL as part of the circle. If using a video, start with a horseshoe shape and then move into the circle when it comes to discussion time.

Atmosphere

Think back to when you joined a small group for the first time. What went through your mind?

"I wonder what it's going to be like?"

"I hope they don't make me do anything stupid/talk out loud/hug anybody!"

"I don't know anyone here, but they all look like they are already friends."
"I haven't been in a class for years; I hope they don't treat us like kids."

These will also be the concerns of some of the people coming along to any group you lead, especially if it is made up of strangers. Your role is to ensure that your group is made to feel at ease, therefore what you say and do first will influence your participants' attitudes to both you and the group. As they arrive, think about:

- Welcoming each person
- Having name badges
- Making introductions if you know people
- Making refreshments available

Getting Started

The first session is vitally important in influencing the decision of your participants to come again or not. A common way to start any meeting is with administration, notices and course content, sometimes called 'housekeeping'. Whilst this has value in getting the 'boring' bits out of the way, learning works best when people are already 'warmed up'. Therefore, any notices are more likely to be remembered once the session is actually under way. But some things are important to do first, e.g. where the toilets are and fire procedures. You can then go straight into a short exercise designed to relax your participants and get them talking to each other. This is often called an 'ice-breaker'.

Ice-breakers

Ice-breakers can be used in two ways. If your group members don't know each other, the purpose of the ice-breaker is to set them at ease, exchange names and relax them. If they do know each other, the ice-breaker can be course-related, engaging them quickly with the subject.

An ice-breaker also communicates:

- Who is in charge of learning - you or the group
- What kind of SGL you are e.g. directive, participative, fun, serious
- Whether the course is interactive or 'sit and listen'

Many of the courses you will be working with will already have ice-breakers built into them. If not, keep the following in mind when deciding what to do:

- The literacy level of those attending. Would they prefer talking to writing?
- The length of your session. You should not spend more than 10-15% of your time on this exercise
- Have clear and simple instructions. If it's too complicated more time will be spent working out what to do rather than doing it!

Housekeeping

In your notices you should remember to mention the following:

- Start and finish times and dates of sessions (you could have these on a handout)
- Whether refreshments are available and what charge
- Ask to turn off mobile phones

You will also have 'house rules' which are specific to your group of people. Ideally these should be established and agreed by the group. They should cover such things as:

- Everyone arriving on time
- Showing respect for each other's opinions
- Being able to disagree with each other, but in a courteous manner
- Allowing each person to contribute to discussions as they want
- Level of confidentiality

Confidentiality

As the SGL it is impossible for you to guarantee total confidentiality or privacy of what is said within your group. As a good rule of thumb, the expectation for your participants should be an agreement that what is said within the group, remains within the group. As the SGL, however, you should point out that participants are responsible for the information they do share with other group members.

NB: You should be aware of any policy your supervising organisation, or church, has regarding confidentiality of information and child protection. In some circumstances, e.g. knowledge or suspicion of child abuse, you will have an obligation to share that information with appropriate others.

Leading Group Discussions

As the SGL you need to maintain interest and build an atmosphere where everyone feels part of the group, able to contribute and knowing where it is going.

To achieve this you need to:

- Keep discussions focussed
- Know your personalities
- Listen to what is being said
- Promote discussion
- Clarify understanding
- Re-emphasise key points at the end of a session

Listening

The art of a good SGL is in his or her ability to listen actively to what is being shared by the group. Active listening is a skill and takes practice.

Research shows that in any communication, the way a message is received can be split in the following way:

- 7% words
- 38% tone of voice
- 55% body language

Active listening involves taking in the whole picture and showing that, not only have you heard, but understood.

Active listening checklist:

- Eye contact - look at the person speaking
- Use encouraging words and head nods
- Have a relaxed and open posture
- Ask open ended questions to encourage the talker
- If you're not sure what they mean, ask
- Use closed questions to confirm understanding
- Show you understand by briefly summing up what was said

Questioning

Asking the audience the right question at the right time is the skill of the facilitator who understands the pulse of his or her group. Questions asked at different times, to different people, in different circumstances, are used to:

- Encourage group members to speak
- Direct the discussion
- Control the group
- Challenge gently those who dominate discussions

Open questions are used to invite discussion. They cannot be answered with just a 'yes' or 'no'. Open questions begin with either: Who, What, When, Why, Which, Where or How.

For example: "What do you enjoy most about being a parent?" rather than "Do you enjoy being a parent?"

Closed questions are responded to with a specific reply and are used for confirmation. For example: "Have I understood you properly? Do you mean ...?" or "Lynn, do you agree with what's just been said?"

When questioning, DO:

- Spread questions around the group
- Use direct questions to gain attention
- Rephrase, or pass on, questions that are not immediately understood

When questioning, DON'T:

- Answer your own question
- Question a group in a regimented order
- Ask long, involved or multiple questions
- Ask lots of closed questions

Using Exercises/Activities

Before you ask your group to undertake any exercise or activity, make sure you understand it properly yourself. It's also important to ensure you have any equipment that may be needed. It's all too easy to suddenly find you need three pieces of string, an elastic band and a paper bag!

Explain the exercise clearly and simply and ask the group, not only whether they understand the task, but to summarise it back.

Difficult situations

Even the most experienced SGL will sometimes encounter difficult situations. You may feel you are losing control of the group, perhaps one person continually dominates conversations or you have a perpetual latecomer. Listed below are some of the more common difficulties you may face and suggestions on how to deal with them.

Latecomers

- Start your group on time
- Utilise the 5 minutes at the beginning of a session with an 'added-value' activity e.g. a fun group exercise not officially part of the course material

Questions forced back to the SGL for response

- You don't have to answer
- Pass the question back to the group
- If persistent, choose to discuss over coffee

Domineering Dora

- Acknowledge appreciation of input coupled with 'We haven't heard from ...yet'
- Pass around two/three tokens per person to be used when they speak. No tokens left, no talking!

Chatty Charise

- Lower your voice - this attracts attention
- Switch to smaller groups
- Pause and wait

Know-it-all Norman

- Acknowledge his experience coupled with asking the group for other perspectives
- Consider whether he could mentor another participant

Doesn't listen Dave

- Ask Dave how his ideas compare with others
- Give Dave prior warning that you'd like him to summarise the group discussion at the end

Shy Sharon

- Utilise smaller groups for some discussions or exercises
- Ask easy questions
- Socialise with her before the session starts and during breaks

Argumentative Arnold

- You'll never win an argument with him, don't try
- Use group dynamics - "Would anyone like to respond?"

You'll find that as your group develops, many of these difficult situations will be resolved by the group members themselves. It is usually in the earlier stages you will need to adopt strategies to cope with them yourself.

Sensitive/Emotional Issues

If any of sessions are going to touch on issues that have the potential to be 'hot spots' in people's lives, e.g. conflict, sex, bereavement, then it is vital that you have prepared beforehand. In this situation you must take extra care to look after your group members. Don't force them to speak or share personal information that they may regret.

It is always good practice within a group to have a 'nominated helper'. This is someone you trust, who isn't there to lead, but can be called on to help if needed. For example, someone may start crying and leave the room. Your helper will be able to go and check that they are OK.

The SGL role is not to solve people's problems, but we do have a responsibility if we are tackling 'hot spot' issues to provide some support to our group members. Be aware of what support groups, counselling or relevant agencies are available in your community and make this information available to your participants.

Summary

These are just a few tips to help you lead your group more effectively. Remember - you don't need to be an expert on a topic, or have lots of experience to be a good SGL. It's more about right attitude, caring for people and a willingness to learn. The more you lead, then the easier it becomes.