

Group Time: Motivating Children at Group Time

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Renew children's interest in group-time meetings with these lively and interesting ideas
By Ellen Booth Church

Is interest flagging at your group-time meetings come April? Often children need something extra special to inspire and motivate them at this time of year. Just think about it. You and your children have probably shared 125 or more group meetings together. And there are probably three more months of school left! There are things you can do to help children become fully involved members of the group again. Try some of the following techniques to reinstall a feeling of community and participation. You'll probably find yourself motivated, too!

Provide Challenges

Most children rise to a challenge when it's presented in a playful way. Consider introducing the "Challenge of the Week" at your Monday group time. Then give children all week to work on it. Save your Friday meeting for a group sharing of children's solutions. Possible challenging questions include "How many different ways can you use boxes (or paper towel tubes, lunch bags, paper plates, buttons, or shells)?" You can even enhance the challenge by asking a specific question like "How many ways can you use paper towel tubes to make something that rolls?"

Present simple, creative movement or physical challenges for children to experiment with. For example, you might ask such questions as

- Can you move like a cat? What if the cat is frightened, shy, hungry?
- Can you use your body to make the first letter of your name?
- How can we move this Ping-Pong ball across the circle without touching it?

Extend these body challenges by asking children to help create a group "What My Body Can Do" graph. Use pictures to list actions such as finger snapping, hopping on one foot, jumping with two feet along the bottom of the chart. List children's names vertically along the left side of the graph. Invite children to predict how many times they can hop or snap and then test their estimates! Use tally marks to record their predictions in one column and the number of times they can actually hop, skip, or jump in the other!

Motivate with Books

Books are always a good starting place for sparking interest and inspiring a feeling of community. A simple remedy can be to have a "My Special Book" month in which you invite children to bring a favorite book from home and "read" or share it with the group. At this point in the year, children are often ready for longer and expanded experiences with books. This is a perfect time to start reading a chapter book. Children will want to come to each meeting just to find out what happens next in the story. Some good beginning chapter books include

- The Frog and Toad books by Arnold Lobel (HarperTrophy). With their short chapters, these are perfect first chapter books for preschoolers.
- The Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle books by Betty MacDonald (HarperTrophy)
- My Father's Dragon by Ruth Stiles Gannett (Random House)
- The Mouse and the Motorcycle by Beverly Cleary (HarperTrophy)

Of course, great picture books with interesting and inspiring themes are a wonderful motivational tool. Try stopping part way through reading the book to discuss what has happened so far and ask children to predict what will happen next. Consider using

- Which Would You Rather Be? by William Steig (Joanna Cotler)
- Who Wants a Cheap Rhinoceros? by Shel Silverstein (Simon and Schuster)
- Company's Coming by Arthur Yorinks (Scholastic)
- The Yellow Umbrella by Jae Soo Liu (Kane Miller Books). This is a very special wordless book that has an accompanying music CD that sets an amazing mood. It is a New York Times Best Illustrated book.

Inspire with Problem Solving

Here's an intriguing whodunit for your kids to solve that uses their patterning skills (the case of the missing pattern!). Use simple math counters or classroom materials to create patterns that have missing pieces. Start by laying out a long simple two-part repeating pattern such as crayon, block, crayon, block. Leave pieces out throughout the long pattern. Explain to children that you need them to help you solve the mystery of the missing pieces. Ask them to put on their thinking caps and look to see what is missing and where. Just for fun, you can pass out magnifying glasses to add a Sherlock Holmes effect to the investigation. Repeat this game frequently, using more and more complex patterns.

Move Children with Music

Sometimes motivation and inspiration can come from nonverbal sources. Music has been used as an inspirational tool for centuries. Bring music recordings from a variety of cultures to your classroom. A great choice is the Putumayo Kids. This excellent collection of music will draw children to group time. The music will accompany them while they play and work, inspiring their art and movement. ECT

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