

## GroupTime

By Ellen Booth Church

### Creating Community at Group Time

The beginning of the year is the right time to establish a climate of kindness, caring, and sharing for your group-time meetings

Group time is often your first “formal” introduction to the children, and a time when you set the stage for creating a sense of community. By demonstrating your loving acceptance for all children’s backgrounds, experiences, and viewpoints, you create a group-time environment that says, “All are welcome here.” At the same time, you are modeling just how you want children to be with one another. The goal is to celebrate individuals while creating a sense of community. We know from recent studies that children who feel a sense of identity within a group are better able to adjust and be successful in school. With a focus on helping children develop skills in collaboration, responsibility, and self-regulation, your back-to-school group time can be the place where it all starts.

### Reflective Listening

An important part of feeling welcome in a group is the feeling of being listened to. Start your year off right by teaching children the skill of reflective listening. You can use reflective listening not just as a special activity, but also as a way of life in your group time. At the beginning of the year, it will take time and attention to learn the skill. But it will quickly become a natural part of your classroom community.

Talk about the importance of listening and being listened to at group time. “How does it feel to have someone listen to you? How does it feel when someone doesn’t listen to you?” Teach children how to use reflective listening by demonstrating it first. Invite a child to tell you about what he did last night or what he wants to do this weekend. As the child speaks, model quietly looking at the child. When he is finished, tell the group what you heard him say. “Jimmy was telling us about the kitten that he got last night. It’s black and white. Does anyone remember something else that Jimmy said?” Now it’s their turn. Invite another child to share and say, “Let’s see how well we listen. Listen carefully to Jane and when she’s finished, raise your hand if you can tell me something she said.” Invite children to share what they remember. Always check back with the speaker to see if the children’s remembrances are correct. This validates both the speaker and the listeners.

You can use a song to help this activity along. Try the song below with children.

Are you Listening? (to the tune of “Are You Sleeping?”)

Are you listening, are you listening?

To what [child's name] has to say?

What did our friend tell us?

What did our friend tell us?

Share it please, share it please.

### Make a Job Chart

Everyone has a job to do in the classroom! Build awareness of the importance of cooperatively managing the classroom by creating a work chart together. Ask children what they think their job is (listening, sharing, taking turns) or what job they'd like to have (putting out snack, watering the plants, cleaning up) and record their responses. From the list, ask children to brainstorm a list of responsibilities that can be used to create a job chart. Display these charts in the room where you can refer to them throughout the year to remind children of their responsibilities.

### Create Group-time Rules

Children are more likely to abide by the rules if they have a hand in creating them. Start a discussion about group-time rules. Begin by asking the children what things they think are important, and record their thoughts on chart paper. Read the rules back to children and choose one to discuss further. Each day, choose another one to discuss until you have two or three main rules to post in your group-time area. Once the rules have been posted, discuss and review them often.

### Introduce

#### Cooperative Games

Cooperative games are a great way to help children work together as a community. As you begin the year, introduce a cooperative game once a week to get things started on a positive note. Always start cooperative games with a short discussion of what it means to cooperate: When we cooperate, we work together to solve a problem or get things done.

Here is a cooperative game to try:

Give pillows to children and ask them to consider how they can work in pairs to carry them from one end of the meeting area to the other without using their hands. Then, put on some light and lively movement music and ask the pairs to start moving toward a large bin or box set up at the other end of the circle. When they get there, ask them to drop their pillow in the container and go back to their original seats. ECT

### terrific transitions

One of the first rules children need to learn in the beginning of the year is how to move smoothly from one activity to another. One way to teach children how to transition cooperatively is to create a transition time "buddy system." Each day at group time, ask children to close their eyes and select a friend's photo (or name) to see who their buddy is for the day. Then, when a visual or auditory signal is given to signify a transition, children have to quickly find their buddy and listen for instructions.

Ellen Booth Church is an early childhood consultant, keynote speaker, and author.