

Preparing Groups for Hard Conversations

Exercises to help create an atmosphere of safety, respect, and accountability.

Whether it is news of a friend's parent's divorce, the death of a peer at school, questions about healthy relationships and sexuality, climate justice or hundreds of other tough topics that young people in our congregations deal with, churches must find ways to create safe spaces and positive boundaries to engage difficult topics together. Models that our young people view on news shows tend to have people shouting over one another until the loudest person commands the sound bite. Political debates have devolved into nasty nicknames for opponents and arguments void of facts. Even on church issues, youth see denominational or congregational in-fighting that leads to schisms or threats rather than empathy and resolution. All around us we see negative ways of engaging people in tough conversations. The church should be proactive and seek ways to provide tools for the young people in our congregations to have respectful, caring conversations with people who they may disagree with or where the topic may just be uncomfortable no matter how important.

This Quicksheet offers three categories of exercises to help you prepare your group to have difficult conversations. These exercises can be done over a series of weeks or by choosing an exercise from each category. This will begin to create an overall atmosphere of safety, respect, and accountability within your group. Revisiting some of these exercises before tackling a difficult topic will continue to build on the foundation of trust that allows for discussions to be more honest and meaningful.

**As a reminder, before embarking on any series or discussion of a tough topic, you may want to consider:

- Getting the support or approval from your youth committee or governing body
- Informing the pastor
- Providing parents with an outline of the plan for discussion
- Offering a parent meeting in order to discuss the whys and hows of the discussion
- Informing youth about what you will be discussing so they aren't surprised

Category #1 - Listening Exercises: These activities are followed by discussions of our own listening skills. By doing more than one of these activities, hopefully each person begins to strengthen their ability to listen to others.

- **Block building activity:** Pair youth up and have them face one another with a barrier between them (a table turned on its side on the floor with youth sitting on either side). Give each young person a set of identical blocks (12-15). Be sure to have some different shaped blocks or different colored blocks. Have one young person build a structure behind the barrier so only they can see it. Once it is built, have them describe to the youth on the other side of the barrier how to build it. The youth giving the instructions may only use words, no hand motions. The youth following the building instructions may only ask for an instruction to be repeated, they may not ask for clarification. Once the structure is built, have youth look at both structures. Have them switch roles and give the person who followed instructions the opportunity to build and then give instructions, while the other follows.
Post-activity discussion questions: What was hard/easy about giving the instructions? What was hard/easy about following the instructions? Which role was easier? Why? Where could more clarification have been given in the instructions? What did this activity teach you about how you listen? What could this activity teach you about how you communicate?

- **Telephone:** This old-fashioned children’s game ends with a discussion for youth. Have youth sit or stand in a circle or a line.
1st Round: Start by whispering a sentence or phrase in the first person’s ear and have them whisper it to the next person, etc. Rule: Only 1 “repeat please” allowed per person. The last person states what was said to them. How close is it to the original sentence or phrase?
2nd Round: Have youth mix themselves up so there are different people at the start and end of the line. In this second round tell a more complex story with details, names of people and/or places. Maybe this could be a story about an act of kindness. Rule: No repeats allowed. As in the first round, the last person states what the story was to see how close it was to the original.
3rd Round: Choose a video, maybe something about an act of kindness.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tuwg86ypMG0> It should be about 2-3 min long. Show it to two or three people in your group, away from the others in your group. Then ask each of these people to retell the story as best they can with as many details as they are able to remember to another person. Then have that person tell the story to someone else, etc. Who remembered the most details? What helped the person who hadn’t seen the video remember details from the story? Does seeing something change the way you can retell a story?
Talk as a group: What was difficult in the first two rounds? Did you listen differently when you knew you couldn’t ask the person to repeat what they said? When have you been in a situation like this, where you were repeating a story told to you without being able to ask for immediate confirmation about the details? Have you ever repeated something that you mis-heard? What clarifying questions would have been helpful during this activity? What is most helpful in understanding what someone is saying?
- **Virginia Reel Conversation:** Arrange chairs so that there is an inner and an outer circle. Each outer chair should have an inner chair across from it. Explain that a question or prompt will be given and each person in the pair will have 2 min to share their answer. While each person is sharing, the other person should listen. After the person is done sharing, if there is still time, clarifying questions can be asked. A leader should ask the questions and keep time so that pairs know when to switch.
Once each person has shared, ask the people on the outer ring to move one chair to the right. Now everyone should have a new partner and the leader should give a new question/prompt.
At the end of the time allotted, the leader can ask the group to tell you something new they learned about the others in the group. Can the youth remember who told them what? Who felt they were listening well at the beginning but found it harder the more partners they had to meet? Who felt it was hard to think about what to say when there was a time limit?
Questions or prompts might include the following or ones that are topical to what you plan to study next:
-Who is a teacher/mentor from whom you have learned the most, and what did you learn?
-What sport/instrument/art medium/skill do you wish you could spend a year learning to do well, and then what would you do with that?
-What is an act of kindness that you have done or had done to you in the last year?
-What is something about church/youth group that you enjoy?
-What song always makes you smile, and why do you think that is?

Category #2 - Trust Exercises: Even if the youth in your group have known each other for their whole lives, you have to establish trust within so that everyone feels comfortable sharing their thoughts and opinions.

- **Take me to your leader-** Set your room up with some chairs, pool noodles and safety cones. This should be an easy obstacle course. Group youth in trios. Have each trio decide together who will be the leader, who will be the safety monitor and who will be the listener. Once this is decided, all of the listeners are blindfolded and taken to one end of the room. All of the leaders are taken to the other end of the room. The safety monitors are given a bell to ring or kazoo to hum and they will stay near the blindfolded person. The object of the game is to communicate well and to safely get the blindfolded person to the correct leader.

At the go signal, the leaders all begin to shout out instructions for their blindfolded person to follow. The blindfolded person must determine who their leader is and follow that voice for instruction. The safety monitor is not allowed to talk but walks near the blindfolded person ringing their bell when the person should slow down or change directions.

Change roles and change up the obstacle course a bit.

Post-activity discussion questions:

Which role was hardest? Easiest? Was it difficult to listen for one voice when others were talking? Who did you have to trust the most in this activity, the leader or the safety monitor? How does it feel to not be sure of whether you are following the right leader?

Additional questions: When has someone's safety been your responsibility? How does it feel to have someone relying on you for safety? How does it feel to have to rely on someone for your safety? What does this activity tell us about trust? Connectedness? Communication?

- **Paper People cards: 'The me you see, The me inside me'** - Purchase or cut out cookie cutter shaped people outlines. Also have a stack of affirmative words on slips of paper, such as kind, inspirational, faithful, thoughtful, cheerful, good listener, friend, positive, steadfast, considerate, etc. You will need multiple slips of paper for each word and some blank slips as well.
 - Have youth spend 5-10 min drawing and writing what they think people see when they look at them. Remind them to do physical traits but also some things most people know about them: violin player, active in church, always texting, Tic-Toc obsessed, quiet, vegetarian, etc.
 - Have youth share in the large group or in smaller groups. When each person has shared, have youth turn their person cut-out over. Ask youth to think on the things beyond what people see and to think about the core of what makes them happy, or faithful, or scared or apprehensive, hopeful, or frustrated. Then write some of the things that might be important to know about you but aren't easily seen from the outside. Some youth may not feel comfortable doing this and they should be allowed to pass. Youth do not need to share everything they wrote.
- To close this activity, spend some time in reflection and affirmation:*
 - Have youth put their cut out in front of them with the "Me You See" side facing up. Then the group should take words from the affirmation piles and put them on people's cut outs as they see those words in that person.
 - Read Psalm 139: 1-6 & 13-16. In silence, what are the things inside of you that only God and you know? Don't share those things, just think about them. Consider in silence something about yourself for which they want to give thanks to God.
- **Paper Bag Questions-** This is often a good activity at the end of a retreat or a few weeks of studying together. The idea is to give each person a chance to talk about themselves and others a chance to find out something interesting about them. Sharing more than our names gives each person a glimpse into another person's perspective and experiences. These help to create bonds of trust within a group.
 - If you have a large group, split the group up to a more manageable size (10-12 in a group is fine).
 - Give each person in the group a paper bag, a pen, as many slips of paper as there are people in the group and then have markers available.
 - Have everyone use markers to decorate their bag with their name and any other doodles.
 - They should then open up their bag and place it in front of them.
 - Using a different slip of paper for each person, everyone should write a question they would like to ask that person, fold it in half and put it in their bag.
 - These questions are anonymous but do have boundaries. The questions should be sincere, not embarrassing and not of a sexual or substance related nature.
 - Once everyone has written a question for each person in the group, everyone can open their bag and silently read through their questions. People can choose not to answer a question if they don't feel comfortable.
 - Take turns with each youth reading the questions and sharing their answers.

Category # 3 - Safe Space Exercises:

- **Draw where you feel safe and why-** Give each person a piece of paper and access to markers, colored pencils, or pens. Ask each person to draw the place they feel safe, comfortable being themselves, like they can totally let down their guard, cozy and secure. In that place, put the things, food, people, pets, music, books you like to have there with you. Once you are done, using words around the picture, write why this place feels safe and maybe their definition of a safe space.

Have participants share their drawings. Ask them to share their definition of safe space and write important words from their definition on a white board. Once everyone has shared, talk about the words they used to define a safe space and how the space you occupy as a youth group can become a safe space. What items need to be wherever it is you meet? What must the group do to keep it a safe space for everyone? How do trust and communication fit into creating a safe space?

- **Affirming each other-** Words and actions of those around us can make us feel included or excluded, safe or unsafe, trusted or untrusted, affirmed or negated.
 - In pairs or trios, have youth brainstorm 5 ways you can make someone feel unsafe or excluded by your actions and 5 ways you can make someone feel excluded by your words. Ask youth to share with the larger group. Have they ever seen this happen? (Has this ever happened at youth group?)
 - Then brainstorm 5 ways to make someone feel included, safe, affirmed using words and without using words. Have youth share with the larger group.
 - Watch this video about words we all need to hear.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m5yCOSHeYn4>. Once you watch it, decide as a youth group what list of 20 words you all need to hear from each other in order to feel included and affirmed. Take some time to say those words to each other!
 - Make posters to hang up as a reminder to people to say these words. Create social media posts with these words to send them out to the rest of the church and to your youth during the week. Keep using these words each week.

- **I say this, you say WHAT?** - How to respond when you don't agree is an important thing to practice. Talk about ways they see people disagree that lead to hurt and disconnection. You may show an example of this using video clips from a news show or debate. Then brainstorm ways to disagree where people don't feel put down or "cancelled". There are productive, respectful ways to disagree about things. Remember in your brainstorming to include things like:

- Keep to the topic and don't start to make personal attack
- Listen, listen, listen and then pause, think and remember that you are talking to a person with feelings. Everyone comes with their own set of experiences that create a perspective or lens from which they view the world
- Slow things down by pausing
- Don't talk over someone else or interrupt
- Use "I" statements
- Ask clarifying questions.

As a leader, create some case studies that your youth can act out to practice respectful disagreements. You might use one that shows an argument that turns disrespectful and creates hurt feelings and no resolution. Have the group discuss how they could have ended in a more positive way.

You may want to consider some statements or signals to use when you disagree in youth group, like: "can we hit the pause button for a moment so that I can collect my thoughts and then respond?" or "I am struggling to listen right now. Can someone from the group summarize our points?" and "That is not my experience, share with me the experiences you have that lead you to think/say that?"

Covenant: expectations, rules for engagement - Once your group talks about listening, communication, trust and safe space, they are ready to write a covenant with one another that lays out what they promise the group as far as their words and actions for being in relationship together. This will be what you can refer back to at each meeting or when starting a discussion about a potentially difficult topic. What goes into the covenant should be informed by what they have learned and experienced regarding listening, trust and safe spaces. Knowing that tough conversations will come up in a year of youth group, you might want to include “Rules for engagement” or “Ways to love each other in the weeds” in the covenant and list some of the phrases that are helpful when disagreeing, as well as some of the words we want to hear as affirmations.

Author: Christy Williams
Project Manager: Gina Yeager-Buckley

