

Approaches & Strategies for Facilitators

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How to Encourage Openness and Creativity in Kids

Process vs. Outcome

While we hope that all participants will create a piece of writing or art to share with the community and beyond, the needs of the kids in your workshop will vary, as will their final “products.” Try to be adaptable to what each child needs and offer a range of tools and support to enable their creativity. In any activity, there is no one outcome that is desired or acceptable; the workshop should celebrate openness and choice in all aspects, including whether a child wants to participate in any given activity.

Similarly, focus on empowering kids as the authors of their own stories. For example, if you’re providing feedback on a story, avoid offering your own ideas and opinions about what you think should happen in the story; instead, ask them prompting questions, focus on clarity of communication, and tell them what interested you about the story. Sharing your own stories to connect with kids and encourage them to share their own is a wonderful way to build rapport, but be sure to allow kids the space to lead the writing direction.

Growth Mindset

One of the most helpful approaches to working with children is called growth mindset, which originated in the field of psychology and emphasizes that individuals are always growing, changing, and learning. Within a growth mindset framework, there is no such thing as being “bad” or “failing” at something; for kids doing creative writing and art, missteps, redirection, and revision is all part of the process. (Dweck, 2016) When faced with children who seem stuck or without ideas, or who feel they aren’t creative or good at writing, encouraging the growth mindset can be hugely helpful.

A simple way to do this is to avoid using language that emphasizes good versus bad. This can be applied to contributions to group discussion as much as to the child’s own writing. It can be so hard not to say things like, “Wow! That’s amazing!” After all, you want to encourage kids, and you want to make them feel good. But try alternative forms of encouragement that empower kids to explore their own ideas and thoughts without the need for approval or affirmation.

Here are some ways to encourage a growth mindset:

- » Saying "Thank you for sharing," instead of "Good point"
- » Pointing out specific details you notice in their writing and art, e.g. "You used so much description in that—I really felt like I was there"
- » Saying things like "I sense that you really like to draw—is that true?"
- » Asking a lot of questions about the piece a participant is working on, saying, "I'm so interested to know more about such a such."
- » Emphasizing process: "Tell me about how you created this. It seems like it must have taken some time." "You've really been working hard on this and playing with this."
- » Encouraging them to "make mistakes": "Keep going! Don't worry about how perfect it is. There's always time for revision."

Active Listening

Building strong relationships with kids is key to fostering a welcoming and creative space. Active listening will play a large part in fostering this sense of community. Active listening is a communication skill that focuses on seeing beyond the words the kids may be speaking to the intent and meaning behind those words.

Some key active listening practices are:

- » Giving full attention to the speaker; being 100% present
- » Trying not to be distracted by thinking of how you will respond and what you will say
- » Paraphrasing and repeating back what was said to you
- » Avoiding interruption, judgment, and correction
- » Avoiding trying to "fix" the problem—sometimes kids just want to work things out and process their thoughts aloud, without needing advice
- » Paying attention to nonverbal cues

Age-Specific Considerations

The age group of your participants will have a significant bearing on how you frame questions and explain activities, the pace of their work, and the overall expectations of what they write. As a reference, here are some of the key differences between the younger and older age groups:

	7–9 year olds	10–12 year olds
Literacy & Story Writing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Understand what they are reading » Join sentences with "and" and "but" to better explain events. » Use words like "because," "then," "now," "when," "before," "while," and "although" to link ideas. » Can present the same stories with varied sentence types. » Use pronouns like "he," "she," and "they". » Can distinguish between fact and fiction as well as provide their opinions for why they think an event occurred. » Can explain things in detail but may sometimes get frustrated trying to convey their thoughts. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Understand words that describe personalities in a more abstract or descriptive way (someone could be bitter, sweet, or blue). » Tell and write stories that are logical and ordered in a way that make sense to them. » Retell stories using their own words, focusing on important points. » Explain why an event or story may have happened. » Use more abstract and complex vocabulary learned from school

Interactions & Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Can confidently speak. » Want to interact with friends and family frequently. » May feel unsure of surroundings and need reassurance. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » May feel self-conscious about their ideas. » Change how they communicate based on who they are with or where they are physically. » Begin to develop strong preferences and perspectives. » Have questions about what they hear. » Understand how people are feeling from what they hear and what they see. » Understand when they are misunderstood and know how to address that.
Development & Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Understand jokes and riddles. » Use "like" or "as" for comparing things. » Express concrete and abstract ideas. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Remember information using strategies, such as using familiar references (associations), picturing the information in their minds, breaking information into smaller chunks, and repetition.

(FROM RAISING CHILDREN NETWORK, 2021 & CAPITAL HEALTH AND CALGARY HEALTH REGION, 2007)

Creating an Inclusive and Safe Space

Accessibility Needs

During registration, be sure to inquire about access needs so that you're aware prior to the first workshop and can make the necessary adjustments. If a child is an English language learner, for example, you can make an effort to have a facilitator present who speaks their language or have a translation app or tool ready for you to use in communicating with them.

During introductions in Session One, allow space for kids to state their accessibility needs, or ask beforehand if you may do it on their behalf; for example, a child who is hard of hearing may need to ask others to repeat themselves, or speak more slowly, so this should be communicated to the rest of the group from the start.

Remember that kids interact and communicate in different ways. Allow kids to interact in the means that is best for them, even if it means that they don't make eye contact or speak much throughout the sessions. Try not to make assumptions about behaviour and intent; for example, if a child is wearing headphones, do not label them disrespectful and ask them to take them off as they may have a sensitivity to noise.

How to interact with somebody who is non-verbal:

- » Speak in normal language to them.
- » Respect their decision, or inability, to talk to you at the given moment. It is no reflection on you as a person or their trust in you.
- » Ask them to nod/shake their head to answer questions, or to make hand/body gestures so they can communicate in alternative formats.
- » Ask them to write/draw to communicate in alternative formats and ensure that there is paper and writing tools in each station to allow for this.

How to interact with kids who are English language learners or emerging bilingual:

- » Ask beforehand what method of communication is easiest for them.
- » Have alternative forms of communication and, if desired, two forms of communication, e.g. speaking and writing at the same time.
- » Communicate through hand and body language as well as visual cues.

Anti-Oppressive Framework

An anti-oppressive framework takes into account the complexity of power dynamics in society and the various ways in which we all experience oppression in our lives through political, cultural, social, and economic factors that drive inequality and injustice.

Critical self-awareness is crucial to anti-oppressive practice. It allows us to be responsive to the diverse and changing needs of those we work and interact with, as well as forces us to question our own worldview, and how we ourselves might be reinforcing or participating in oppression.

You can implement anti-oppressive practice in your workshop by

- » Being aware of the language you use and how it might inadvertently exclude groups, e.g. using binary pronouns and making gender assumptions,
- » Actively working to acknowledge and shift power towards inclusiveness, accessibility, equity, and social justice,
- » Understanding that you have as much to learn as you have to offer,
- » Being conscious and active in the process of learning and recognizing that the process, as well as the product, is important,
- » Understanding that when someone from a minority group speaks out against something, this is not an attempt to disenfranchise or oppress another group, and
- » Creating a space where people are safe but can also be challenged.

Trauma-Informed Approach

For many children participating in this project, certain memories and experiences related to the pandemic may be traumatic. Taking a trauma-informed approach to leading your workshop will prevent the inadvertent re-traumatization of kids while ideally promoting healing and recovery.

What is trauma?

- » Trauma is prevalent in our society, including for children, youth, and families.
- » Trauma is when someone experiences an event or situation where they felt very threatened. This event or situation surpasses a person's ability to cope.
- » The pandemic may have been a traumatic event for some; having this awareness before facilitating Lost & Found is important.

How does trauma impact children?

- » When trauma happens, it can make it difficult for children to feel safe in what may seem like a safe situation; children adapt to cope.
- » These adaptations are normal responses to abnormal experiences.
- » This could look like a child having difficulty following directions, not speaking, struggling to build relationships, or missing sessions.

What does being "trauma-aware" mean?

- » Knowing that trauma impacts on a child's brain, body, emotions, and behaviour
- » Viewing a child as a whole person, not just seeing their behaviour
- » Wondering what happened to this child, not what is wrong with this child
- » Seeing that undesirable behaviours are attempts to soothe emotional dysregulation (e.g., fidgeting, pacing, shouting out, ignoring, not following what is being asked, leaving the space), often done without awareness

Main Principles of a Trauma-Informed Approach

1. Safety

- » Create safety, both physical and emotional, through consistency and structure.
- » An agenda helps children know what to expect for the group session; make sure everyone is clear on instructions and plans and what is being asked of them
- » Start and end with a grounding activity.

2. Trustworthiness and Transparency

- » Ensure that your words and actions match.
- » Do what you say, and say what you do.

3. Peer Support

- » Nurture a warm, connected, supportive group environment.
- » Create moments and opportunities for sharing and for finding commonalities in their experience of the pandemic.

4. Collaboration

- » Remember that everyone is responsible for creating a trauma-aware environment.
- » Reduce power differentials: all pandemic experiences are real, valid, and equal.

5. Empowerment, Voice, and Choice

- » Create space for children's voices. Value and honour their stories, no matter how seemingly simple or mundane they may be. Do not have an agenda or seek out a story that seems meaningful, moving, or profound; accept what kids say and offer with gratitude.
- » Allow choice; never pressure or force a child to participate in any component of the group session.

How to Respond to Common Challenges

Lack of Participation/Writing

Remind kids that there is no right or wrong way to go through this process! Often lack of participation and writing is due to a lack of confidence.

Here are some more tips to get kids going:

- » Don't focus on completing pages that weren't finished in earlier sessions; just chat with the child to prompt some ideas, and encourage them to jot down notes.
- » Children may need help scribing (you write as they dictate). When this happens, ensure that it is the student's voice that is being recorded by refraining from influencing the narrative.
- » The task of writing a finished piece in Sessions Three and Four can be daunting. Try proposing a smaller, less intimidating writing task. Here are some options:
 - A description of a person or a place
 - A paragraph of writing
 - A series of numbered or ordered steps, e.g. a typical day during online school
 - A poem with one word per line
 - A drawing with a caption
 - A drawing with annotations

Imbalanced Group Dynamics

One or two very talkative and outgoing kids can quickly overshadow more reserved participants and take over a group discussion or activity. Once you notice this, try these techniques to balance the conversation and the group dynamics:

- » Emphasize and re-emphasize the Community Agreement: a key element of a kind space is one in which we listen to others; therefore, no one should talk over or interrupt another.
- » Call on specific kids or take turns speaking, in a circle, limiting everyone to one idea/contribution.
- » Ask the talkative kids to “save their thought/idea” so they don’t forget them, and so you can eventually hear them, by having them write them down.
- » Give the more extroverted kids a task or “job,” such as taking notes for the group.

Conflict

Whenever an issue with a child or between children occurs, practice constructive conflict management with these steps:

1. Stop what you’re doing.
2. Make eye contact.
3. Stay calm.
4. Actively listen.
5. Focus on the issue.
6. Treat the other person/people with respect.
7. Negotiate a compromise if possible.
8. If a compromise is reached, state it clearly for confirmation.
9. Take a break with the intent to revisit a conflict if a compromise is not possible.

If you find yourself frustrated or angered by a child's behaviour, try noticing their strong emotions, vocalizing that you recognize them, pausing, and giving them some space and time. No matter how frustrated you feel, try not to raise your voice or reflexively discipline them; allow them to share their perspective without interrupting them.

Resources

- » <https://drive.google.com/drive/u/1/folders/1fN9H7CNnR5BbM-vbtMsV3e8vpzscv5ADY>
- » Active listening with pre-teens and teenagers. Raising Children Network. (2021, September 7). Retrieved September 21, 2022, from <https://raisingchildren.net.au/pre-teens/communicating-relationships/communicating/active-listening>
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- » Negotiating with pre-teens and teenagers. Raising Children Network. (2021, September 8). Retrieved September 21, 2022, from <https://raisingchildren.net.au/pre-teens/communicating-relationships/communicating/negotiating>
- » Talking and play: School-age children. Raising Children Network. (2021, March 22). Retrieved September 22, 2022, from <https://raisingchildren.net.au/school-age/play-media-technology/play-school-age-development/talking-play-school-age>
- » The Anti-Oppression Network. <https://theantioppressionnetwork.wordpress.com/what-is-anti-oppression/e.pdf>