Put In Your Two Cents

Your Input Is Important!

When your classmates talk about something—a movie, a video game, or a basketball score—do you offer your opinion? It depends. You participate if you:

- Know the movie or game they're talking about
- Feel comfortable sharing your thoughts with them
- Are willing to put in your two cents

Whether or not you participate in a group discussion is up to you. But how you participate determines whether or not your opinion is *useful*.

Objectives:

A Explain the importance of participating in a group discussion.

B Demonstrate how to participate in a group discussion.

What a Group Is

To offer a useful opinion, you need to know what a group discussion is all about. And, that means you need to know what a group is. A **group** is a number of people who get together to perform a task, solve a problem, make a decision, or just talk about something. A "good" group is made up of about seven members—enough to provide a variety of viewpoints, but not so many that an individual will get lost in the crowd.

Though each person in the group has the ability to influence the others, there's usually a leader who puts the group on a certain course. This person makes sure the group's purpose is clear and that each group member knows and understands his/her role. Since you're responsible for your own part, it's important to know what you're expected to do and how your part fits into the big picture.

When you know what's expected of you—and who has the "say"—you can better understand how the group will operate and how the group members will interact. Each of these is important for participating in a *useful* way.

How the group will operate. If a few friends are talking about how hot it is outside, the group's purpose is to give and find out opinions. The way the group operates, in this case, is casual. No real "rules" exist beyond the normal standards of common courtesy.

When a group is completing a particular task by a certain deadline, a more formal way of operating might be required. Since the group members need to know not only what the task is and who is doing what—but also *when* each piece needs to be completed—they might put together a schedule or timeline.

A group that wants to solve a problem or make a decision needs to know *how* it will reach its conclusion. Its members need to know which procedure or format they will use to operate the group. Will it be the creative-thinking process or the rules of logic?

How the group members will interact. Interaction among the members has a lot to do with the topic at hand—and *who* knows about it. Whether or not the questions are asked out loud, group members want to know:

- Who knows the most about the subject?
- Who has experienced a situation relevant to the discussion?

Those who know the most—or have the most experience—tend to rise to the top and "lead" the discussion. So, what you know personally plays a big role in what you have to say and in how you are perceived.

If you don't know the topic very well, you might feel that you have very little to contribute. But, there is a way that you can participate even if you're not an expert in the subject. You can use a questioning technique to help clarify what someone else is saying. For example, in a discussion about cars speeding through an area you've never visited, you might ask a question that rephrases or builds on another person's statement. If one person says, "I think a lot of college students are rushing to class from the nearby dormitory," you might respond with, "So, you think the local college students are the main offenders?"

If you *do* know about the topic, and if you have an opinion, your opinion will be better received if you can tell *why* you think your opinion is correct. Backing up your statements is especially helpful if you happen to hold an opinion that's different from what the majority thinks.

Why It's Important to Participate

It's important to participate in a group discussion for several reasons. A discussion helps you:

- Think critically—so you can analyze how a thought has become someone's opinion
- Organize your thoughts—so you can express what's on your mind in a clear way
- Develop your understanding of a topic—as you obtain new facts and perspectives
- Know when to change your mind—by guiding you through the thinking process
- Gain confidence in speaking to other people—by providing opportunities to speak

In addition, participating in a group discussion exposes you to new and different ideas you might not have thought of on your own. Group members are able to generate ideas, share them, try them out, and respond to them in a way that an individual can only hope for. So, discussing a topic with others gives you the advantage of each group member's brainpower—and the collective brainpower available when group members put their heads *together*.

Participate With Confidence

Being involved in a group discussion is easier for some people than others. We all know the "quiet" types who hesitate to speak up about anything. And, we're also familiar with the "talkative" types who take more than their fair share of the discussion time to describe their personal experiences.

So, what does it take to participate in a *useful* way?

What to Do

Say you've volunteered to help community leaders determine the effectiveness of their four-hour, fire-safety training program by spending 90 minutes in a neighborhood discussion group. Members of your group include:

- An elementary-school child
- An older person
- A firefighter
- A librarian
- A chef
- A high-school principal

Know the group's purpose. At first, you need to make sure that everyone is on the same page regarding the group's purpose. If you're supposed to come to a "group opinion," you need to write that down. If you're supposed to "document the ways in which the training program has increased the awareness of fire safety in the community," you need to make a note of it. Everyone needs to be aware of which direction the group discussion is headed so that at the end of 90 minutes, you'll be there.

Agree on ground rules. While you're talking about what you want to accomplish, you can (as a group) lay some simple ground rules for appropriate behavior during the discussion.

For your discussion, your purpose is "to list five ways the training program could be improved."

Ask that everyone be allowed equal time to talk—and that each group member offer only relevant information. Also, recommend that no one judge new ideas right away.

If your group has a leader, you'll probably be told what the ground rules are, but if you don't have a designated leader, discuss what's acceptable behavior. It will only help! Once you have a clear purpose and some guidelines, you're ready to tackle the subject matter.

Find out what people know about the subject. Since you can't really evaluate a program unless you know something about it, you need to determine what the fire-safety training program is and how it works. Of course, any group member who has taken the training knows something about the program. In addition, anyone who has personal experience with a fire knows something about the importance of fire safety. Examine the first-hand knowledge and experience that each group member brings to the table. And, allow each person to share a brief summary of his/her knowledge in the area so that the entire group can begin from the same starting point. From this point forward, what you know—or gather—will determine what you contribute to the discussion.

Elementary-school child: Has never taken a fire-safety program

Older person: Went through a house fire almost three years ago

Firefighter: Teaches the fire-safety program twice a year

Librarian: Has taken the fire-safety program and encourages coworkers to take it, too

Chef: Has experienced seven kitchen fires in 19 years of cooking

High-school principal: Conducts regular fire drills at the high school

You: Are familiar with the high-school fire-drill routine but haven't taken the training program yet

Contribute in an open-minded way. As the discussion begins, you can join in by using one or more of these discussion tools:

- Asking questions
- Building on someone else's comment
- Volunteering a new idea
- Pointing out missing information
- Helping the group summarize what's been said

Asking questions. To ask a question, make sure you think through what you're going to ask before you ask it. Are there any words in your question that hint at a value judgment? Could someone be offended by what you ask? It's important to evaluate what you have to say before you say it, avoiding all sarcasm. Of course, you don't want to feel as if you can't say something you know to be true. But your goal is to phrase your questions in a way that seeks helpful information and doesn't attack someone's idea or suggestion.

Building on someone else's comment. To build on someone else's comment, determine what it is the other group member has said—and add to it. If the chef mentions that the fire-safety training program does not address fire safety in a kitchen setting, you might respond with, "Maybe we should look at all the things the program does not address but should, such as kitchen fire-safety rules."

Volunteering a new idea. You can volunteer an idea or suggestion anytime you see an opportunity. When the firefighter asks, "How many of your friends have taken the fire-safety training program?" the group members say they know 16 people. The older person, however, mentions that none of his/her friends have taken any training in fire safety. So, the librarian asks the older person why that is. The older person shrugs, "I don't know. Maybe they don't want to drive into town." Then, you volunteer an idea: "What if the community were to provide transportation to and from the program? Would that help?"

Pointing out missing information. If important information needs to be addressed, don't hesitate to point it out. If the high-school principal mentions that the fire-safety program could be offered to students at the high school, you might notice that elementary-school students are left out of the picture. So, you point out that if elementary-school children aren't given the opportunity to learn about fire safety, they could be victims of a fire before they reach high school.

Helping the group summarize what's been said. At the end of your discussion—or even at quiet moments along the way—it's helpful to summarize what's been discussed so far. You can do this by saying, "We've talked about who has gone through the program, which factors are not addressed by the training, how our older population can be involved, and the importance of including elementary students."

Contribute in a useful way. Keep in mind that you want to participate *usefully*. This means that you need to pay attention to the things that affect how *well* you participate—things such as:

- Listening well
- Taking turns well
- Providing accurate information
- Leading the way

Listening well. First, make sure you pay attention when others are speaking. Don't look around the room or play with your watch. Give the person eye contact and acknowledge what s/he has to say. In addition, don't close off an idea that's out of the ordinary. Be open-minded as you listen, so you don't miss any possibilities.

Taking turns well. Avoid blurting out statements without thinking. Take a moment to decide what you'll say—and the best way to say it. Also, try not to interrupt someone else. It's hard enough to express your thoughts in an orderly way without someone interrupting you! Be respectful of another person's time to speak. Your turn will come soon enough.

Providing accurate information. When you have something to say, let the others know whether you're stating a fact or an opinion. If you state a fact, make sure you can support it. Don't just make a sweeping statement or generalize a situation unnecessarily. Handle one portion of the topic at a time, and make sure that the information you're giving is accurate. Your group members will appreciate the reliability of the information you provide.

Leading the way. If there's a silent time when no one wants to speak, don't hesitate to take the reins. Be a leader! Start talking about what's on your mind, and others will probably respond, in turn. Don't let a quiet moment intimidate you. Sometimes, the other group members lack discussion know-how or confidence. And, by observing you, they can learn to participate usefully, too.