

Want to Build Community and Professional Development at the Same Time? Try a Book Discussion Group!

Maybe you are an administrator of an early childhood program looking for new ways to build a culture of learning and initiate a conversation around best practices in your program. Or you may be a technical assistance provider working with a diverse group of administrators, wondering how to bring them together to form a community and spark dialogue around early childhood leadership. Book discussion groups could be one way of meeting your objective. For the past few years, I have organized book discussions and would like to share some lessons learned along the way.

GETTING STARTED

Having a well-thought-out plan is your first step. Here are some questions to consider before beginning a book discussion group.

Who, When, Where, and How

Who is interested in participating in a book discussion group? One way to find out is to send a short survey inquiring if there is interest in reading and discussing a book, and if so, what topics or books they might like to explore.

When will the book discussions take place? If you are an administrator of a program, will the staff participate during paid time; such as, at a meeting, lunchtime, children's naptime, or paid time after the program closes? Do not forget to account for time allotted to read the book! If you facilitate an early childhood administrator's group, will the book discussion be part of a regularly-scheduled meeting or held at another time?

Where will the group meet, if it will be an in-person meeting? If the group is meeting virtually, will all participants have access to a computer with virtual meeting capability and Internet access?

How will the books be paid for, and will the cost be part of your professional development budget? Is there a grant or other resource to help with the cost? Is there a local business that can be supported with the purchase of the books? If you are purchasing the book for participants, be sure to ask participants if they already have a copy or if they would prefer to check it out at their library. Keep in mind that providing a copy for each participant may reduce the pressure of needing to finish the book within their library's loan period.

NEXT STEPS

Choose the Book

After collecting the surveys, make a list of the book titles that were submitted. If participants suggested topics to explore, you will need to find books that will address those topics. The National Association for

the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), Redleaf Press, and Teacher's College Press are some organizations with catalogs containing a wide variety of early childhood books. Next, create another survey with the list of books they submitted and books chosen from their suggested topics. They will need to rank order their top three selections. You now have a list of books, in order of interest, to choose for the book discussion.

Determine Questions for the Book Discussion

It is helpful to create a study guide with general or specific questions related to the book to give to the participants before they start reading. The study guide will help participants prepare and will spark group discussion. You may want to start with general questions, such as:

- What did you already know about the topic?
- What did you learn that was new or surprising?
- What new questions do you have?
- What do you want to know more about?
- What was your favorite and least favorite idea?
- What ideas or strategies in the book seem realistic and what challenges your thinking?
- If you could ask the author a question, what would it be?

In addition, some books have questions at the end of the chapters, reflective questions, and activities that you may want to include in the study guide. If you choose to copy material from the book, remember to obtain permission and add a citation giving credit to the author and book at the end of the study guide.

Establish Guidelines for Interaction

When first bringing together a learning community, it is important to establish guidelines for engagement. Some guidelines are logistical and are typically developed by the organizer of the group, including establishing time for breaks, turning off or silencing electronic devices, using video cameras for face-to-face interactions when virtual, as well as muting when not speaking, etc. Other guidelines should be created by the group. One question to help participants think about guidelines for engagement would be, "What will make this learning experience successful?"

Here are a few examples of guidelines suggested by participants in some trainings I have facilitated: uphold confidentiality—what is said in the group, stays in the group; be respectful of ideas shared—no judgments; come prepared for the discussion—read material in advance; and create an environment supportive of all—provide everyone with an opportunity to speak.

Prepare the Facilitator(s)

When members of the group take turns facilitating and managing the group discussion, they will have an opportunity to practice a leadership role. Defining the facilitator role, talking with them, and giving guidelines to help them manage a group, will ensure that they feel prepared and ready to lead the discussion group. Guidelines for the facilitator could include:

- Build trust and safety among the group.
- Be an active listener and encourage active listening among the group.
- Ask a question, then let others answer first.
- Be comfortable with silence; some people need to think before they answer.
- Keep the discussion on track. If the conversation strays too far off-topic, bring it back.

- Introduce a new question if it appears that interest in the question being discussed has declined.
- Make sure everyone's voice is being heard, and no one is being "heard too much." You might direct a question to the "quiet person," especially if they look like they would like to share; however, make it clear that everyone has a right to pass.
- Remember that there is no need to get through every discussion question; let the conversation flow naturally.

Develop an Evaluation

You will want to gather feedback from the participants after the book discussion ends to gain insight into the logistics of the group discussion and better inform future discussions. I suggest including an evaluation form that creates an opportunity for participants to rate criteria as well as answer some open-ended questions. The following are some examples:

Rate the following on a scale of one to five (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = no opinion, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree)

- The discussion enhanced my understanding of the topic.
- Ideas and questions were encouraged.
- The study guide questions were helpful.
- The group size met my needs.
- The length of the book discussion met my needs.
- The amount of time provided to read the book met my needs.

Please answer the following questions:

- What are two lessons you learned from the book?
- What suggestions do you have to improve the study guide?
- Are you interested in another book discussion group?
 - If yes, would you be interested in inviting others to join the group?
 - If yes, what other topics or books would you suggest for the next book discussion?
- Other ideas or suggestions for improvement?

FINAL THOUGHTS

One of my favorite questions is, "If you could ask the author a question, what would it be?" Recently, I was planning a third virtual book discussion for a group of technical assistance providers who have been meeting regularly. Since the author's email address was in the book, I emailed her to share that we selected her book for our virtual book discussion group. In addition, I asked if she could give any suggestions or thought-provoking questions for our discussion and she responded with some great ideas. Then, to my surprise, she offered to join the discussion to answer questions from the participants! Authors may or may not respond to your email; however, you just might be pleasantly surprised to find out they are thrilled you have chosen their book and will share ideas for enhancing the discussion.

Book discussion groups can provide an opportunity to explore new ideas, inspire, motivate, and build relationships. There are many good early childhood books out there just waiting for a group of educators and leaders to discover and discuss!

If you are interested in learning more about professional development opportunities offered by the McCormick Center for administrators of early care and education programs and those who provide technical assistance, please [contact us](#).

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