

DISCUSSION

**BEGINS WITH
PEOPLE**



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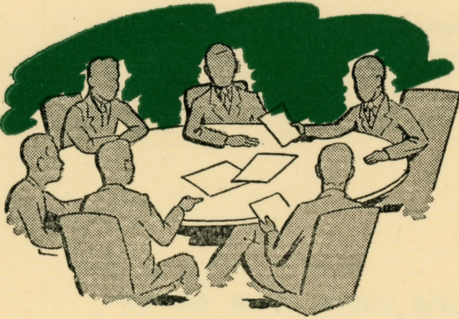
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INTRODUCTION

Discussion is nothing more than an exchange of ideas between people which may be described as group thinking. Good discussion involves the advancing of ideas, the raising of questions, followed by attempts to answer them. It is one method of carrying on a series of purposeful talks with your neighbors and friends.

WHY DISCUSSION



Good discussion develops clear understanding and stimulates the search for information by individuals as well as by the group. The hours spent in talking problems over with your neighbors and friends will be fun as well as educational.

Meaningful discussion tends to make reading more purposeful for it requires observation and encourages study.

Properly handled discussion allows an individual to benefit not only from his own point of view but from opinions expressed by all group members.

Well handled discussion develops a questioning, searching attitude . . . an attitude of wanting to know why . . . of not being willing to accept an idea without understanding the background and reasons therefore.

. . . A critical evaluation of ideas exchanged in the process of discussion brings a realization that there are many sides to a given question. It develops a sense of tolerance in the individual which paves the way for translating group thinking into intelligent group action.

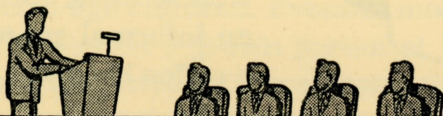
. . . Successful participation in discussion develops self respect and a sense of equality among individuals.

WHY PEOPLE JOIN DISCUSSION GROUPS

Generally speaking, individuals join talking groups to satisfy two kinds of needs—the need to learn from others and the need to act with others. Usually the need to cooperate with others in making decisions and in planning work provides the motivation for the so-called *action groups*.

When an individual decides to take up child study, or the study of family life, his aim is to gain more knowledge about what children and families are like. He hopes to use the new information and understanding to better his performance as a family member, as a parent, and in his relations with people outside the family. His goal is, therefore, not just the gathering of knowledge but rather growth in ability to use what he knows to improve himself as a human being.

When a person studies problems in company with others of similar interests there is a relief which comes when he finds that he is not alone in facing certain problems.



HOW TO ORGANIZE A DISCUSSION GROUP

● Planning the Organization

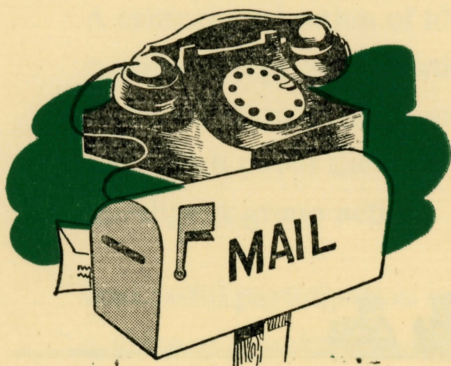
One thing important in organizing a talking study group is a strong desire on the part of one or more persons to start a project that will give them and their friends and neighbors better knowledge.

It is easier to start with a group that is not too large and unwieldy if relatively inexperienced members are to be expected to have the courage to share in the leadership. To begin with a group of six to eight persons and grow as interest mounts is preferable to starting by rounding up a large number of people who will be lukewarm and will soon drop out.

After the person who desires to organize a discussion group has some idea of what he wishes to discuss (parent education in this instance), he could pick out 8 to 12 people, fathers and mothers, friends and neighbors and invite them to form a group. These prospective members may be contacted in person, by telephone or by letter. It is helpful if the person bringing the group together is familiar and "sold" on that which can be accomplished by group discussion.

Where prospective members have had an opportunity to engage in study talking groups previously, the first meeting might well be the initial meeting of the series.

However, if the community has not sponsored such groups previously, it might be well to make the first meeting an informal get-together, even a coffee hour.



● Time and Place of Meeting

At the first meeting, it would be well to discuss the time and place of subsequent meetings. The series of meetings may be held alternately in the homes of members or they could be held in a public building. The meeting place should be picked to fit the group and should be only large enough to seat the members comfortably. The room should be well lighted, ventilated, and readily accessible to all members. Facing windows should be avoided if possible. Comfortable chairs can be arranged in a circle about a table so that all members of the group face each other. Private homes are desirable providing the room is large enough to hold the entire group or provided a broad archway connecting two rooms practically permits a one-room arrangement. The best response will be obtained when each member sees every other member's face.

In planning for a series of group discussions, arrangements should be made for five or six meetings. A series that is too long drawn out may discourage the attendance of some members who don't feel that they want to tie themselves up except for a limited period.

To be most profitable, meetings should not fall more than two weeks apart. This interval of time gives members a chance to do some reading but is not a long enough break between meetings to cause members to forget from one discussion period to the next.

For many groups an hour and a half is the preferred length of a meeting. It is hardly possible to do justice to any topic under discussion in a shorter time and a two hours meeting in the day time is sometimes too long to be practicable.

The time of day selected for meetings, their duration, and frequency will vary greatly among groups. In places where group members do not live far apart morning meetings are satisfactory. Early afternoon is perhaps the time most commonly selected except by women whose children are napping at that time. A meeting called for 1:30 means that mothers can go home before or along with their school-age children. Evening meetings have the advantage that there is often a grown person at home to look after the children. Unfortunately, in some cases, this person will be the father who is thus deprived of attending the meeting.

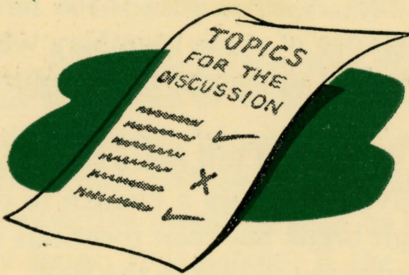
● Selecting a Chairman and Other Personnel

The group should select a chairman who will call the meeting together, and preside until the discussion leader takes over. Whoever is chosen for chairman will need to be someone with organizing ability who can stimulate others to work and who has considerable tact. A personality that makes it possible to work agreeably with others is an asset that outweighs experience. One of the important qualifications for the chairman is dependability.

Another member of the group may be given the responsibility for notifying the other members of the dates of the meetings and for keeping a brief record of each session.

A third person should be made responsible for keeping on hand books, pamphlets, and other reference material.

● Planning the Content



Each member of a group plays a part in selecting the subject for study and discussion. A group member is likely to be more interested in a topic he has helped to choose than he is in topics chosen by others. In the same way the fact that he him-

self talks about the topic heightens his interest and helps him to remember points discussed.

To make sure that every prospective group member has a voice in deciding upon the topics to be studied some groups distribute in advance of the first meeting a list of topics from which members choose those subjects that are of the most interest to them. By checking their choices in order of preference, the members give a basis on which to make the final selection.

Another way of deciding on the topics to be studied is for the group to hold a preliminary meeting at which time those present suggest subjects to be considered and agree on the order in which they feel the more generally desired topics might be taken up.

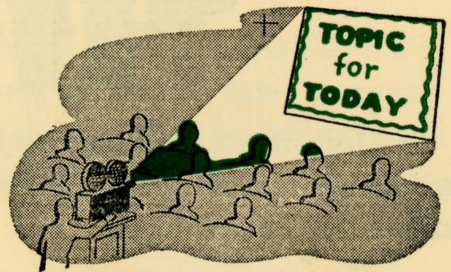
A program of study and reading is made not to be rigidly followed but is to serve as a general guide.

THE FIRST DISCUSSION PERIOD

The outstanding aim of the first meeting is to acquaint the members with each other, their backgrounds, number of children, etc. Personal introductions can accomplish this purpose.

The initial meeting of a discussion group should be as interesting as possible. One suggestion would be to start things off by a panel, movie or other visual aids or a symposium guided by a discussion leader.

These talks could be followed by group discussion so that everyone in the group will have an opportunity to contribute or to question. The office of the Council for Children and Youth is available for assistance



to local leaders in consultation in setting up panels for this important first meeting.

Other methods would be for the leader to open the discussion with a brief statement of the topic which he had previously prepared including the reasons for interest in the topic, the problems involved, and the various points of view.

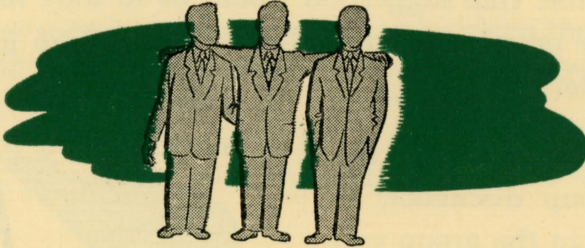
- . . . the leader could ask a challenging question or could ask individuals to interpret or define the topic itself
- . . . or the leader could read a recent news item and ask for comments, agreements, or disagreement.

NOTE:

Attention is called to a very excellent booklet, "Study—Discussion Group Techniques for Parent Education Leaders," issued by the National Congress of Parents and Teachers.

THE DISCUSSION LEADER'S ROLE

"Leadership is not to be thought of as the function of one man—a leader—but rather as a series of functions necessary to the productive operation of a group and performable by any member of the group competent to the task."¹



Most studies of leadership have concluded that factors related to energy—vigor, enthusiasm and endurance—all play a part in the making of a leader.

The very first principle we should recognize is that a leader can do none of the things necessary for leadership until he has himself become personally acceptable to the other members of the group.

The discussion leader's first task is to open the discussion and start the ball of conversation rolling. His opening remarks should accomplish three purposes:

1. To establish a warm and friendly climate.
2. To stimulate as much interest in the problem as he can in a few words.
3. To start the members of the group talking together.

To do this it will be necessary for him to conclude his remarks with a question—preferably directed toward a specific member of the group. The question should be one that cannot be answered by a simple yes or no.

¹ "Group Leadership and Democratic Action," Haiman, page 38.

Until a number of persons have met together two or three times they do not have the "togetherness" or the feeling of belonging that makes them a group. For this reason it may be a good idea to have the same person serve as leader for several meetings at the outset of the project.

The leader more than any other member of the group sets the mood, tone and atmosphere in which the group will operate.

In order to be prepared to exercise effective group leadership a leader must have insight into the personality structure of those he would lead.

Ideally, a person should be a leader in some areas and a follower in others. Leaders can possess all of the other personal attitudes and skills of leadership but if they lack a working knowledge in the area in which they are expected to lead, their prospects of success are not bright.

Thus, leadership may pass to many individuals at different moments and the more defused it becomes the stronger and healthier the group.

The leader's goal is, therefore, to work himself out of a job.

In order that the discussion leader may encourage others to participate freely in discussion, he should realize that:

- . . . The leader's job is not to act as an authority but rather to be alert to the need for asking group members to find the answer.
- . . . The leader's job is to draw out other members of the group. He should guard against dominating the discussion by relating his own experiences.
- . . . The leader should extend a friendly welcome to members of the group as they come to each meeting. Try to learn the names of all of them.
- . . . A leader must be sincere.

- . . . A leader should be a good listener.
- . . . A leader should have a tentative outline to follow, and leading questions in mind.
- . . . A leader should merge and be a member of the group, expressing facts when it fits in but not dominating the discussion period.

In the more mature group the leader will find himself in the position of the person who opens and closes the discussion; in other instances, depending on the degree of group maturity, the leader will lead only when needed.

- . . . The leader should not insist on recognizing a member before giving him the floor. On the other hand the members should be courteous and not attempt to speak while someone else is talking. The leader should suggest that everyone take part. He should caution against anyone talking too long or too often in order that all may have an opportunity to be heard.

Regardless of the topic chosen, the leader and committee chairman can help get the meetings under way by setting down in advance a few questions relating to each subject—or by using illustrative incidents from their own experience—to provoke discussion.

It is sometimes helpful, if a blackboard is available, to put notes on the board where everyone can see them and where they can serve as the group's memory. One member of the group may be asked to perform this particular leadership service.

By bringing the problem into focus, by staking out the ground that must be covered, endless hours of waste and confusion can be avoided.

A wise leader will do all in his power to keep the group from becoming complacent and dogmatic about its decisions. He will do all he can to encourage an open-minded, experimental attitude.

The leader can demonstrate his good faith in the democratic role by repeatedly encouraging disagreement with his views and never holding what a person says against him.

The leader can uphold points of view which the group has overlooked even though he personally may not believe in them.

It is well for a leader to tell the members of the group to speak directly to each other. He can encourage a great deal of spontaneous interplay among them. Above all, he must not cut into the conversation with comments of his own before and after every contribution is made.

One of the vitally necessary leadership functions—one in which every member of the group should participate—is to question and critically evaluate the ideas brought forth, “Where did you get those facts?”; “Is that a typical example?”

Another of the things that a group leader can learn, but only from experience, is to sense when a group is ready for summary and transitions. This becomes evident from clues such as bafflement on people’s faces and restlessness in their bodily movement.

The leader’s final duty in the cooperative thinking process is to bring the discussion to a satisfactory close. He should do this by summarizing what has been accomplished. He can point out what has been agreed upon, where there has been clear disagreement, and what remains confused and unresolved.

MISCELLANEOUS SUGGESTIONS CONCERNING DISCUSSION

The leader should throw discussion back to the group when a question has been asked of the leader.

The leader can encourage a speaker to speak toward the group and not toward the leader by saying, "Do you suppose the group could hear better if you faced them."

● Defining the Subject

1. What is it we wish to study?
 - a. Is the entire group concerned and interested in this subject?
 - b. Is the subject made up of a number of problems? What are they?
 - c. Which one will serve as a starting point?
2. Is the subject clearly and accurately stated?
3. What does the group already know about the subject?
4. What kind of additional information is needed?

At intervals during the discussion the leader should briefly summarize and bring together the ideas that have been developed which will indicate whether or not a group is staying on the path that will take them to their goal.

- . . . A leader should make a final summary of each meeting indicating what has been accomplished by the group and suggesting the point of departure for the next meeting.

RESOURCE LEADERS AND MATERIALS

One of the important jobs of the leader is to help the group recognize the time when its resources have been depleted and it is ready to use resource people from outside.

When a subject under discussion is one involving special knowledge it is a great help if a resource person can be found who will assist the group along at moments when the information he or she can give is essential to group progress. If the question is one on health, a nurse or a physician may possibly help out. The teacher, the librarian, the minister, the social worker, the leader of youth groups and the counsellor are some of those who will be available in many communities on special occasions.

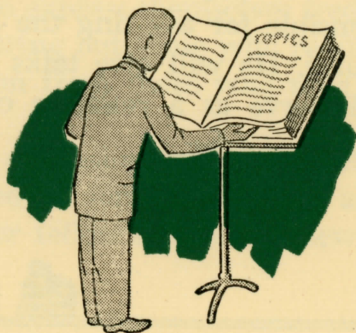
Resource people should not be used until the group is ready to achieve most from the invited guest. If a group is ready, a resource person might be used:

- . . . to supply technical information when the discussion hits a snag
- . . . to answer questions that have come up in previous meetings.

To supply reference books for the use of group members is an important part of discussion group planning.

Often a shelf of books at a local library on child and family life can be reserved for the use of the group. The librarian will also be able to suggest other reading material, fictional and otherwise, that will enliven the study hours.

It is recommended that most groups begin by relying on their own resources, having faith that intelligence and hard work will result in a creative experience for all. Parents have in their own families rich observational material on which to draw. They see their own children grow and change from day to day. There is ample professional help available on which groups can always draw for assistance if they find they need help.



THE PROFESSIONAL LEADER

Sometimes a group has the good fortune to find a person trained in leadership who also enjoys broad knowledge of his subject and is accessible for guidance to the group.

This type of person would function as a consultant:

- . . . In assisting the group to plan a series of discussions giving appropriate reading, reference, etc.
- . . . In giving an introductory lecture as an orientation for a series of discussions.
- . . . By sitting down with a talking group to discuss questions about which the group has been reading.

In general the professional leader plays an important and authoritative role to the extent that he stimulates group members to study, to think, to discuss, to increase their knowledge and understanding of children and to develop greater maturity in persons as parents. To this extent is a professional leader fulfilling a legitimate role. Once the group is well underway, however, the professional leader should withdraw to the role of resource person.

Both professional and lay leaders have their unique roles to perform in study discussion group procedure. When professional and lay leaders cooperate in leading a study discussion group the actual organization and maintenance of the group will be the job of the lay leader. The professional leader will be largely responsible for assisting the group in planning the content of the course. He will give talks at least occasionally at meetings and will serve as a resource consultant when technical or difficult questions arise.



THE ROLE OF THE GROUP MEMBER

Members of the group must accept their share of responsibility for making the group function properly. They cannot sit back and absorb but neither is their constant participation demanded. If one person does more than his share of the talking, it is up to the other members to make contributions.



Every member of a democratic group can share leadership to the utmost of his ability. Leadership should constantly pass around from one to another. The responsibility a member takes in the one role is slightly different from his duties in the other.

To be a good group member one must know how as a member one can contribute both to the progress of the group as a whole and to the ease with which the leader performs his job.

A group must not be disturbed if one or more group members show emotion and shocked difference of opinion. Disagreement is healthy, it makes people think.

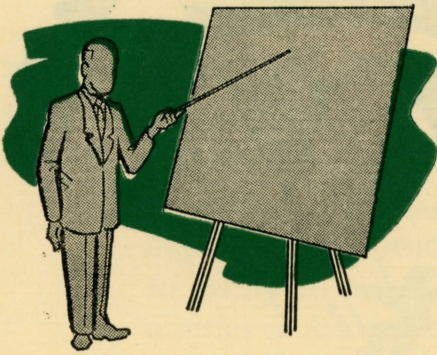
Group members must work with the leader in developing plans that are agreeable to all in the group.

The entire group should be sensitive to the needs of participation of all group members. With the help of the leader, group members can encourage all members to express themselves freely. The group should particularly try to bring out those who require encouragement and to divert discussion from those who tend to talk too much.

The first rule to be followed in discussion groups is: "Say what you think, but be sure it is based on some experience and study, and try to understand the other fellow's point of view if it differs from yours."²

² Bergevin, Paul, Discussion Guide, Number One, Democracy.

WAYS OF STIMULATING GROUP DISCUSSION



The use of a blackboard does much to stimulate discussion. It helps the leader organize what is being said into concise statements, which when written on the board gives the group the advantage of visual reproduction.

A notice of the meeting, together with a list of questions on the topic to be discussed, can be sent out in advance. This encourages members to study the questions and organize their own thinking in regard to them.

Another method of drawing out opinions is to make a statement and ask the group to express possible answers orally, or list the pros and cons of the statement. A time limit can be set for this procedure as a means of obtaining immediate participation.

Another pleasant change for drawing out discussion is the use of the short story, novel or movie as a basis for discussion. In addition, using fiction allows the group members to move feely into a discussion of such things as husband-wife or parent-child relationships, without revealing intimate situations in their own families.

ANALYZING THE GROUP'S ACCOMPLISHMENTS

How does one know when a study-discussion group has been successful?

There are obvious indications:

- . . . interest
- . . . good attendance
- . . . responsiveness
 - expressed
 - active participation
 - outside work
 - reading
 - preparations for the meetings

In evaluating the progress of the group it is necessary to give attention to:

1. Have the goals that were set at the first meeting been accomplished?
2. Is the group becoming more cooperative?

It would be well for a group to spend a few minutes at each meeting analyzing itself

