

GUIDANCE FOR LIBRARY STAFF ON ENGAGING IN SMALL GROUP WORK WITH YOUNG CHILDREN

In the *FIRST*[®] *LEGO*[®] League Discover programme, library staff will have an opportunity to work with children on a range of exciting activities that will develop their learning in science, technology, engineering and mathematics. In this booklet, we offer some helpful pointers to engaging in small group work with children, so that library staff can participate in the programme with confidence.

Be yourself

This is our first piece of advice. If you are relaxed and able to behave as you do normally in everyday life, then children will respond positively to this. The programme activities are great fun, so play alongside the children and enjoy them!

Be positive

Children respond well to adults who are encouraging and positive. Smiling, in addition to the use of other affirmative body language, such as maintaining eye contact and nodding approvingly, are important.

Sometimes children wish to test adults, and so may engage in some behaviour which you find challenging. It is important to respond to this behaviour calmly and positively, reminding them of what they should be doing, and offering distractions at times by prompting them on to new behaviours/activities.

Listen and watch carefully

Children respond well if adults listen to them and let them know they are listening through attentive body language.

Interacting with children on their level is important so that eye contact can be made. Talk calmly and in a pleasant manner.

Use simple sentences and clear language. Children can be introduced to new and challenging words if they are placed in sentences that make their meaning clear.

Watching how children respond to you is important – if they ‘tune out’, then this is an indication that they have not understood the language you have

used, and you should try again, using simpler language. Sometimes you might have to re-phrase a complex concept two or three times before they can understand it. Using gestures also helps in communicating with young children.

In addition, if you can link an abstract concept to a concrete example, in addition to an example they are familiar with, that also helps children to understand. For example, if you want children to think about the concepts of light and heavy, letting them hold and talk about light and heavy objects would be of value, and then ask them about items in their everyday lives that they think are light or heavy.

By carefully listening to, and observing, children's responses, adults can help them to extend their understanding.

Prompt discussion

Communication is central to children's learning, and so talking to them, and developing conversations, is important.

There are a number of ways to prompt discussion with young children. Using open-ended questions rather than closed questions is an important strategy. A very useful phrase is, "Tell me.." e.g. "Tell me about the model you have made." Other useful phrases are, "I wonder...", "What do you think about...". These phrases do not close down the line of questioning, but they offer the child a means of responding with the points that are foremost in her/ his mind. Using words such as 'what', 'why' and 'how' is valuable in this regard.

Repeating back what the child has said to you is also a useful strategy to help the child to learn. This enables the child to build on her/ his contributions and can crystallise her/ his learning. Extending what children say is also helpful, which involves repeating what he/ she has said, and building on it by contributing a new idea.

You should communicate by using a mixture of direct instruction/ closed questioning and offering more open choices in order to prompt thinking. Closed questions are useful to check children's understanding and identify what they know already. Sometimes, it is also helpful to ask children to repeat the instruction you have just given them, so you can check their understanding.

If a child seems to be struggling with an activity or challenge, then using a series of prompting questions can be helpful to encourage problem-solving i.e.:

- What do you think might happen if you did X?
- How do you think we can fix this?

- What could we try next?

Leave space after a question for a response. If children are asked multiple questions with little time in between them it can be confusing, and sometimes children need to have an opportunity to think for a while before responding.

There may be times when a child will not be able to identify the answer to a problem even with additional help from you in terms of the questions you use, and on those occasions, telling them what to do, or modelling it, would be useful. Giving them time to practice what they have just learned is also important. As they practice, you can offer them feedback on what they are doing.

Give feedback

It is helpful for children to have positive and encouraging feedback, as it can boost their confidence and give them pride in their work. Using phrases such as, “That is great!” can be empowering, but it is helpful if you can give them more specific praise, as they can then take forward that learning to their future activities e.g. “I really liked the way you tested if the base of the pulley was going to be strong enough before attaching it.”

It is also helpful to praise the effort children are putting into a task e.g. “You have really worked hard on that balancing that model, well done.” This gives them the message that effort and persistence are rewarded as much as the final outcomes.

Build on children’s contributions, even if they are unexpected

Young children may surprise you by some of the things they say, which can seem a little off topic at times. But rather than dismissing these ideas outright, try and build on them and link naturally back to the topic at hand. For example, if a child wishes to make a model that does not relate to the theme of the group activity, be positive about their ideas, but find some way to link it to the theme, even if this seems like a tenuous link. That way, children will not feel deflated in that you have failed to respond to their idea, but they will focus more clearly on the task at hand.

These kinds of seemingly off-topic ideas and comments by children are often related to the imaginative and creative ideas they have. At this age, they talk about imaginary experiences, and they also engage in pretend, fantasy and imaginative play. This is developmentally appropriate. If this talk and play does not relate to the topic/ task at hand, then it can be used as a learning opportunity. That is, acknowledge their ideas, but use it as an opportunity to lead their learning back to the topic at hand. For example, if a group has been asked to build a house with bricks and a child begins to play with a single

brick, pretending it is a wicked witch, then you could suggest that the child tries to build a house with the group that is so strong that a witch could not enter it, so drawing on their imagination in a positive way.

This points to the importance of you being clear about what you want the children to gain from the session, as then you can draw them back to the core learning outcomes when required. The Discover Team Meeting Guide outlines what the aims of each session are and so if you need to, keep going back to the booklet to remind yourself of what the key focus should be.

Conclusion

The pointers in this booklet provide some guidance on how you can interact with children in the Discover programme sessions. However, it is important not to feel anxious about this, or feel that you have to perform as if you are a teacher.

Going back to the first point we made, it is most important that you feel happy and relaxed in the session, as the children will then respond positively to you. In addition, the fact that you are not the child's teacher is of value, as he or she can respond in ways that might be very different to how he or she operates in the classroom. Children enjoy learning in non-school settings, as they can be relaxing and informal spaces for them. So have fun, and enjoy your Discover programme adventure with the children!