

the tutor

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Room for One More? Strategies for small-group tutoring

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It's 10 a.m. in Mr. Crandall's second-grade class, a colorful room filled with October light. Gavin, the AmeriCorps tutor, gathers his group of four in a semi-circle next to the window. Gavin is a few pages into reading aloud *Two Bad Ants*, by Chris Van Allsburg. He stops to ask some questions.

Gavin: *I wonder what the crystal is that the ants are taking to their queen?*

Janelle: *It's a diamond.*

Gavin: *What makes you think so?*

Janelle: *'Cause of the picture. It looks like a diamond. (Janelle stabs her finger at the page Gavin holds open.)*

Gavin: *Any other ideas?*

Max: *It's not a diamond. She couldn't eat it if it was a diamond. It would break her teeth.*

Justin: *Ants have razor teeth. I seen 'em chew through leaves.*

Max (shaking his head vigorously): *Diamonds are harder. They're way harder than leaves.*

Gavin: *Adam, what do you think the crystal is? (Adam shrugs.)*

Janelle: *I think it's a diamond because ... because it sparkles. They say it sparkles. Isn't that right?*

Gavin: *Let's keep reading. I bet we'll find out.*

Welcome to the lively world of group work. For many of us, the word "tutor" conjures an image of one-to-one—an adult huddled with a child over a book or other work. But the reality varies widely. If you are a tutor who finds yourself often or even occasionally in charge of a group of learners, this issue is for you. We will outline some of the positive benefits of small-group learning, detail specific activities, and give ideas for communicating with teachers.

Volunteer tutors from national service and the community are called upon to lead a diverse array of small-group activities in many classrooms, after-school, and summer programs.¹ The setting you work in will determine expectations for group work and how much choice you have in designing activities. Group work provides many opportunities to develop children's phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension skills—the five skills identified by the National Reading Panel as key to children's literacy development.² This issue focuses on reading and writing with small groups and ways to enrich and expand those activities to instill a love of books in children.

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- locate resources
- connect with peers
- brainstorm solutions
- design and deliver training

Firm Foundations: What does the research say about small-group learning?

Children learn many things best when they can interact with and learn from their peers. Small groups are natural settings for children to exercise and expand literacy skills.³ When children share their thoughts, they can discuss and reflect upon them. The community of listeners builds shared meaning. Students learn to think critically, clarify their thinking aloud, and consider others'

perspectives. Small-group discussion of reading material helps children learn to confirm, extend, and modify their own thoughts about their reading.

Small-group work increases children's self-esteem, sense of responsibility, and respect for diversity. As children grow and develop, their worldview gradually shifts from self-orientation to a broader

acceptance of different points of view. Working cooperatively with a group of peers can facilitate that development.

The most productive talk in the primary grades usually occurs in small groups in response to a book read aloud (Gambrell & Almasi, 1996).

Starting Out: For which small-group conditions should I advocate?

If you are asked to work with a small group of children, you can ask the teacher or educator in charge to:

- Limit your small group to no more than four or five students⁴
- Keep the members of your group consistent
- Create a group that is balanced in terms of learning styles, gender, and interests
- Avoid scheduling group work when some members have to come and go
- Provide a cheerful, regular place to meet
- Suggest appropriate books or activities
- Discuss the learning goals for each child and debrief with you about your group
- Act as a resource if you run into a challenge with your group

The Learning Environment: What surroundings help children learn?

A physical environment that is conducive to learning and discussion is crucial to the success of small-group work. Arrange your group work area in a way that invites interactivity. Circular seating allows everyone to see and hear each other and helps turn children's focus in toward the group and away from surrounding activities that may compete for their attention. Circles also encourage students to direct remarks to each other, rather than just to the tutor.

If you meet with small groups of students pulled out of a larger class, whether in a hallway, library, or the back of a classroom, look for an area with limited potential for noise and other distractions. Ask for permission to rearrange bookshelves or other classroom furniture to create a semi-private space.

Remember that a positive learning environment includes more than physical surroundings. As a facilitator of small-group work, create a judgment-free atmosphere in which students listen to and respect each other. Demonstrate this behavior by giving thoughtful consideration to all comments and contributions.

Meeting Individual Needs: How can I help all the students in my group?

Differing ability levels are challenging but can also be an asset. Encourage children by acknowledging different learning styles, and pointing out the variety of successful strategies students use. For example, you can say, "Did everyone notice how Chandra related the story to her own experience? Who else has experienced something similar to the character in the story?" Students will be more engaged when they feel they have something meaningful to contribute.

Occasionally make each student an expert in something, or let students take on a teaching role for part of the session. For example, students can write and share paragraphs explaining how to do something that they are particularly good at, such as riding a skateboard, braiding hair, or preparing a special meal. Peer learning benefits students of all ages.

Each student brings a unique learning style and set of experiences to the group setting. Maintain realistic expectations for each child and be specific in noticing and reinforcing individual skills and abilities.

A Sample of Small-Group Literacy Activities: How can I make learning meaningful and fun?

Following are a variety of activities that engage groups of students in learning and support their literacy development. Whenever possible, we have included examples and resources to help with planning and implementation. Have fun!

Reading With a Small Group

Reading together will likely be a frequent activity when you meet with your group, especially in a classroom setting. Group reading activities can take many forms, including reading aloud, echo reading, and choral reading.⁵

Reading together provides an opportunity to develop children's interest and enthusiasm for reading, as well as individual skills such as phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary development, fluency, and text comprehension. Group reading activities allow tutors to model and discuss the essential things that happen when we read, including calling up relevant background knowledge, predicting what will happen next, picturing the story, self-correcting, determining main ideas, making inferences, figuring out unknown words and concepts, and summarizing the story.

Whether you or your students do the reading⁶, your discussion can be general or focused on a particular skill or strategy (see *Effective tutor strategies* and *Questioning strategies* sidebars for general discussion guidelines). For example, you might read part of *Two Bad Ants* aloud to your group and ask questions like those posed by Gavin in the introduction to this article. Next, ask children to read on silently to identify the crystal in the story. Guide the reading process by asking questions and showing how to find the answers or confirm predictions in the story.

Don't be afraid to read the same book more than once. Children love to hear or read their favorite stories again and again, and you can focus on different strategies with each reading. Group books by topic, genre, or favorite author if you want to develop and explore themes or sets of related books. While the interests of group members provide the best guide to choosing books, also consult teachers for ideas that support what students are learning in the classroom and are appropriate for their stages of development.

Effective tutor strategies for reading with small groups

While the best book discussions are student-driven and student-centered, tutors are instrumental in keeping the conversation on track. Do this by:

1. Focusing the discussion

- Introduce the story and author and tell children why you chose the book
- Do a "picture walk," if appropriate, to stimulate predictions and/or prior knowledge
- Redirect irrelevant discussion back to the story

2. Prompting

- Invite children to ask questions or comment throughout the story
- Model responses or questions when children don't have any
- Relate responses to real-life experiences and other stories children have read

3. Supporting and informing

- Answer questions and respond to comments
- Encourage students to question and respond to each other
- Provide positive reinforcement (Adapted from Morrow, 1985)

Questioning strategies

When leading discussions with children, create conversations that allow them to:

1. Go beyond simple yes/no answers: *Why do you think the two ants stayed behind?*
2. Summarize or retell the story in their own words: *Where did the ants go on their journey? What happened to them while they were there?*
3. Infer or predict what will happen next: *The ants are looking for a place to hide in the wall. Do you think they will be safer there?*
4. Interpret what they read and imagine alternate endings, points of view, etc.: *What do you think would have happened if the ants hadn't fallen asleep in the crystals?*
5. Engage in a questioning way with the text and one another: *I wonder what the author meant here? What do you think?*
6. Relate the text to other texts they have read, to their own experience, and to the world around them: *Have you ever been lost in a strange place? Have you read any other books about two friends on an adventure?*

Reading aloud. Everyone loves to hear a favorite story read aloud. Research shows that reading aloud is one of the most important foundations of literacy development (Neumann, Copple, & Bredekamp, 2000). It underscores the relationship between the printed word and oral language and allows tutors to model fluency, questioning strategies, and other key skills for students.⁷

Echo reading. Echo reading takes different forms, and is an excellent way to work on fluency. Read a passage and invite children to become the echo, reading it back and trying to match your intonation and expression. Alternately, pairs of students can take turns reading and echoing one another.

Choral reading. Reading together is a wonderful way to share poetry or other texts with a distinct pattern. Helping small groups read a book, poem, or rhyme in unison improves interpretation, fluency, pronunciation, and expression—all in a safe environment. Choral voices offer reassurance, strong modeling, and a “hiding place” where uncertain readers can gain confidence. (See *The poetry slam* for a choral reading activity idea.)

What books should I read with my group?

If you are looking for quality children's literature, these are a few of the many Web sites with book lists and suggestions:

- Reading Rockets:
www.readingrockets.org/bookclub.php?Type=recommended
- American Library Association:
www.ala.org/alsc/nbook02.html
- Book Muse:
www.bookmuse.com/pages/kids/common/kidscorner.asp (includes discussion questions)
- The Book Spot:
www.bookspot.com/booksforchildren.htm

The poetry slam

Short poems are especially great vehicles for choral reading. Students may enjoy presenting their work to a larger group after some practice, even adding other dramatic elements, such as gestures or sound effects. Although this is choral reading, encourage everyone to read at least one line solo.

Help your group decide what the poem is about (comprehension) and how to read it aloud to create appropriate effects (fluency/pronunciation/expression). Here's an example, working with the poem *Construction*, by Virginia Schonberg.

WHAM!

Comes the wrecking ball.

WHAM!

And the bricks fly.

Students decide they will say the first four lines together, very loudly and forcefully.

I see where people lived

After some discussion, they choose one reader to say this line.

In rooms with pale blue walls,

Pale green, pale rose

Only the high voices read these lines, very softly and sadly.

WHAM!

A whole wall crumples,

Sinks into red dust.

Readers gasp, make sounds of amazement.

I see where the people have lived.

Another student gets a solo.

WHAM!

Readers decide this should be the loudest "Wham" line; the following two lines are solos.

I see old tables

And a bed.

All join in at the end, softly again.

Where did they go,

The people who lived

In the rooms with the pale blue walls,

Pale green, pale rose?

As the group practices and becomes more confident, they may add gestures, pointing to what they "see," or work with boards, cans, and stones to create sound effects of the falling building.

Follow this activity by asking students to speculate about where the families who lived in the house have gone. Through discussion, encourage children to invent stories about the families' new lives. Have each group member take the role of a child who lived in the building and write a brief letter about what she likes best about her new life and/or what she misses most about life in the old building. Children may also like to write their own poems, individually or as a group.

Writing Activities for Small Groups

There are many ways to incorporate authentic writing activities into small-group tutoring. Here are a few to get you started.

Writing off the book. When writing activities are tied to the books children read, they gain a better understanding of the strong connection between reading and writing skills and deeper comprehension. Children can write about the book before, during, or after reading.

- **Before reading:** After introducing the book, have children write out their predictions about what will happen in the story. For a nonfiction book, they can brainstorm by listing all the facts they already know about the topic. After reading, return to this list and add anything new learned from the book.
- **During reading:** As they read, encourage children to write down questions, sources of confusion, or interesting points in the story. This reinforces oral questioning and other ways of engaging with the text that you model when reading aloud.
- **After reading:** Group members can react to what they read in response logs, write summaries of the book's main ideas, or rewrite the story using an alternate ending of their own choosing.

Group story writing. There are many ways that your group can write collaboratively. Children enjoy the silly stories that emerge when each group member writes a sentence on a piece of paper, folds it over, and passes it on for the next contribution. You can guide this activity by providing the opening sentence, asking questions, or providing other prompts; conversely, you can give children free rein and watch truly creative material develop.

Language experience. Language experience is a personalized, communicative, and creative way to illustrate the connection between oral and written language. Children tell you a story and you write it down exactly as it is said. You can prompt student writing around a book you have read together or by discussing a topic of interest. Language experience can also help students prepare for or reflect on a field trip or service project. Extension activities include adding illustrations or selecting words from the story for work on vocabulary, spelling skills, or sound-symbol correspondence. Additionally, when children read their stories aloud, they improve their fluency.

Writers' workshop. For a more structured group writing experience, hold a mini-writers' workshop to teach your group about the process of writing, revising, and editing. Whether children write independently or as a group, have them follow these steps:

1. Think and talk
2. Write
3. Share
4. Add or change
5. Revise
6. Edit (spelling, capitalization, punctuation, etc.)

If they like, children can publish their finished work. Children can bind writing in colorful construction paper and decorate the covers with their own artwork.

Exploring Books and Themes Using Drama

If you work with your group in out-of-school time or another setting that allows some flexibility, you have many options for creating activities that are fun, lively, and support literacy development. Harvard University's Reviewing Education and the Arts Project (REAP) study clearly establishes a causal link between dramatic activities and improvement of a variety of literacy skills: oral understanding, oral language, recall of stories, reading readiness, reading achievement, writing, and written understanding (Winner & Hetland, 2000). Best of all, drama is a stand-up-and-do activity that offers release to students who are tired of sitting still.

Reader's theater. As an effective way to build reading fluency, have children act out a story that you have read together. Each child takes on the role of a different character while you act as narrator. Remember that children are *reading* in this activity and don't need to memorize their lines.

Finger puppets. Finger puppets are especially fun for younger readers. Using paper, cloth, and other materials, you and your group can create the entire cast of your favorite fairy tale or nursery rhyme. Encourage children to create their own stories for finger plays as well as acting out familiar favorites.

Freeze frames. For a powerful technique to express and reflect on any story, simply ask children to create a picture, frozen in time, of what an event from a story might look like. Ask each group member to take a part in the picture and say, "Ready, action—one, two, three, FREEZE!" Then ask the observing students to report and interpret what they see. If the group who created the picture has details to add, they can fill them in.

Story building. Drama can be used to build stories, exploring exciting themes and inspiring students to create written versions of their work as a follow-up. Students work together to construct events, shaping a beginning, middle, and end, using many literacy-rich activities (conversations, letters, mime, etc.). One excellent resource, packed with thematic play ideas and assessment strategies, is *Dramathemes* by Larry Swartz (1995).

Reflection: How can I encourage reflection in small-group learning?

Asking students to reflect on their learning reinforces new skills they have acquired and may help identify changes that will make the group run more smoothly. Reflection questions can be simple or complex, depending on the age and level of students, and may fall into the following categories (Gibbs, 1995):

- **Content/thinking questions** focus on the content of the lesson and the thinking skills that students used: *Remember when we all felt confused about the crystal? How did we figure out what it was? What gave us a clue?*
- **Collaborative/social questions** address the quality of the group interaction: *What went really well in our group work today? What can **you** do to make our group work better next time?*
- **Personal learning questions** explore what the individual student learned or felt during group work: *What did you learn today? What did our work today make you think about?*

Managing Groups: How do I keep my students engaged?

Working with even a very small group of students will often be louder, messier, and more difficult to manage than working with a student one-to-one. A certain amount of lively disagreement is a healthy part of group discussion and can help students develop and respect alternate viewpoints and different learning strategies. Still, tutors need to keep group members focused on learning.

Many children may not be accustomed to small-group work. Take the time to teach, discuss, and model the expectations of small-group interaction. Children need time to develop the habits of working respectfully in groups if they have not been exposed to them before.

Posting an agreed-upon set of rules or guidelines is appropriate for some groups. Group members can discuss what is most important to them and work together to write out, illustrate, and post their agreement. Incorporate classroom guidelines into these rules whenever possible. A working agreement might include the following:

- **Attentive Listening:**

Pay close attention to everyone's ideas and feelings.

- **Right to Pass:**

Contribute to the group when you feel comfortable. If you don't always feel like answering a question, it's OK.

- **Mutual Respect:**

Recognize the value of each person and encourage all to grow and learn. Treat each other kindly. Avoid negative remarks, name-calling, and hurtful behaviors.

(Adapted from Gibbs, 1995)



When individual student behavior interferes with group work, tutors need strategies to return students' focus to the task at hand. Try the following:

- **Describing:** Point out the child's behavior in order to make him aware of his actions and their effect on the group: *John, the group is reading this section of the book now. That's what you need to be doing, too.*

- **Chaining:** Link together repeated behavior patterns to alert the child to the way she acts in given situations: *Sarah, I notice that you are more focused when you don't sit next to Emily.*

- **Offering choices:** Give the student the power to make her own decision, but limit choices to those that are favorable to the group: *Would you like to do some writing now or after we read the book?*

- **Redirecting:** Place the child on a different path

when his behavior is not appropriate: *I see that you're having a hard time concentrating. Why don't you keep reading to find out what happens to the ants after they fall into the boiling lake?*

Keep in mind that certain behaviors perceived as disruptive are a natural part of child development. For example, a group of first-graders will not sit still for a serious half-hour discussion. This issue outlines many activities that get children out of their seats and utilize their natural energy while still promoting learning.

Staying in the Loop: How can I maintain communication with teachers?

To keep your group work on track with the teacher's goals, you'll need to find ways to communicate regularly. Teachers are always short on time, so if they don't have a system developed, you can set one up yourself. Here are a few ideas to get you thinking:

- Hang a clipboard with paper and pencil in a visible spot in the classroom. Ask the teacher to suggest and jot activities/book titles on the clipboard.
- Pass a folder back and forth so the teacher can read and respond to your record sheets, or set up a file for your group work wherever the teacher keeps similar files.
- Schedule a 10–15 minute weekly check-in (before or after school may be best).
- Initiate an e-mail correspondence. Figure out the teacher's best times for answering e-mail.
- Ask the teacher to observe your group and provide constructive feedback.
- Ask the teacher if you can observe a group s/he is leading to get ideas.

How can I provide feedback to teachers about group work?

Most tutoring programs gather information about individual students. Your supervising teacher or project staff should be your main guides to the information they need. As a volunteer tutor working with several children at the same time, you will most likely not be expected to formally assess student work, but you may be asked to provide feedback on children's participation in the group. Below is a sample recordkeeping form to help you keep track of group members' behavior and participation.

This is just one possible example—the individual behaviors you look for in group work will vary, depending on your own group's goals and activities.

Student learning can be documented through almost any group work when you as a tutor are satisfied that everyone is contributing fully.

Alternative forms of documentation might include:

- Group writing and multimedia projects (e.g., books, drawings, Web creations, stories, poems, etc.)
- Student self-assessments and peer assessments
- Group performances (plays, skits, reader's theater, story building, poems, songs, etc.)

With group projects and performances, you can document students' individual participation as well as their part in the final product.

Group Discussion Behaviors

Did the student:	Consistently	Sometimes	Rarely
Avoid interrupting and take turns?			
Question others?			
Stay focused and engaged?			
Respond to others' comments?			
Make helpful contributions?			

As Gavin continues to read *Two Bad Ants*, the members of the reading group figure out that the crystal the ants are bringing to their queen is sugar. Two ants stay in the kitchen to enjoy the sweet treat and run into trouble. They fall into a cup of coffee, a toaster, a food disposal, and an electrical outlet, before barely escaping with their lives.

Gavin: Whew! What did you think of those two ants?

Justin: They were stupid. Falling into everything like that.

Janelle: They weren't stupid. They were small.

Max: They couldn't see things like we do.

Adam: They'd be fried if all that stuff really happened to them. Fried ants. My dad ate ants one time.

Chocolate ants.

Janelle: That's gross!

Adam: It's not gross, ants are real food.

Gavin: Max, what did you mean when you said, "They couldn't see things like we do."

Max: Their eyes are different. Stuff looks bigger.

Janelle: Their eyes are on the side. That makes things look weird.

Gavin: So things look bigger to them?

Justin: They ARE bigger. They don't just look bigger.

¹ An informal LEARNS phone survey revealed that more than half the programs contacted have tutors who work with small groups.

² For more information and activities related to NRP findings, see the Winter 2002 *Tutor* newsletter, *Tutoring Our Youngest Readers: Focusing on five major reading strategies*, online at: www.nwrel.org/learns/tutor/index.html.

³ In fact, reading researcher Lesley Mandel Morrow found that small-group readings were preferable to one-to-one settings in increasing comprehension and the number and complexity of children's comments and questions.

⁴ Washington Reading Corps, a statewide reading initiative using national service volunteers, limits tutoring group size to four students.

⁵ For a more detailed discussion of these and other techniques that support guided reading, see *Guided Reading: Good first teaching for all children* by Irene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell (1996).

⁶ Avoid round-robin reading, in which children simply take turns reading aloud. Those who aren't reading get bored easily.

⁷ For more on reading aloud, check out the Spring 2001 *Tutor* newsletter, *Reading Aloud to Build Comprehension*, online at: www.nwrel.org/learns/tutor/spr2001/spr2001.html.

This issue provides only a small sample of the broad range of possibilities for group work. Let your own and your students' creativity be your guide to the many ways you can instill a love of learning and reading in the children in your tutoring group.

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