

CREATING COMMUNITY AT JUNIOR GATHERING LEADS TO SUCCESS

By Anne Collins

Junior Gathering is a Special Place

Junior Gathering is a unique teaching experience in that we have only one week to achieve our goals. Because of our short time together, my first goal is to create a safe, supportive and welcoming environment for the children and staff. This is a major goal Saturday evening, Sunday morning and at the beginning of each day for the first few days. With the children feeling safe and important and with their feeling connected with the other children and as part of a group, it is easier to work on my other goals: teaching Quaker faith through stories and worship, through work and play, through service and through friendship.

How to Create Community

I learned community building tools through a workshop in Children's Creative Response to Conflict, an offshoot of the Alternatives to Violence Project.

CCRC, as it is known, teaches that we work best and avoid conflict best

- ⊗ when we feel good about ourselves,
- ⊗ when we feel good about our group, and
- ⊗ when we know how to communicate and listen.

CCRC teaches that after children feel good about themselves and about their group and after they have learned how to communicate and listen, they then are able to learn and use conflict resolution skills. Using CCRC techniques, I work on the first two goals to create community in my Junior Gathering classes. Many of the AVP games we learned last year before Gathering are the same or similar to CCRC games.

Ways to Create a Safe, Supportive and Welcoming Environment at Open House

Children come to Junior Gathering uncertain. They are uncertain about who will be their friend, what they will do each day, where they will go to the bathroom, if they will get to do things they like to do and probably more. The first evening and first day, I work on helping them find the answers to their questions.

At the Open House, I have activities that engage children but which they can easily leave as their family goes to join other siblings' classes. One major activity is making a "Welcome" sign.

We decorate it and hang it up (after the glue for the decorations have dried.) In this activity several important things happen:

- ⊗ Each child gets to choose from various media and gets to design for himself, what type of decoration to do. By being independent and having free-choice, within the confines of the activity, he is experiencing affirmation as an individual creative person.
- ⊗ Each child gets to participate in what becomes a group project. This is an affirmation of the child as a part of the new Junior Gathering community that is our group.
- ⊗ Each child gets to see during the rest of the week, her contribution to the group project.

Again, this is affirming to her as an individual and as an individual who is part of a group.

At the Open House, children can choose from several activities. This tells the child that there is a place in our group where they can be engaged. Knowing they can make choices for themselves helps them feel welcome. The staff all try to welcome each child, answer their questions and those of the parents, and help the child feel familiar in our new space.

Building Community on Sunday Morning

I start each day with Opening Circle. In the first part of the week, Opening Circle is the group time devoted to building community and welcoming each child. When children enter our classroom, they are greeted by our official "Greeter", the staff person who is by the door and the sign-in sheet. Then they come and join us at the circle. The activities in the circle are songs or games that teach each other our names and games that help build community. As each child joins our group, we are able to welcome him and add him to our name song or game. Again, this affirms him as an individual and as a part of our group.

On Sunday, I directly discuss with the children the uncertainty of being in a new situation. We talk about where the bathrooms are, what our daily schedule is, where we will play, what our plans are for the week, etc. In addition, I read a book designed for kindergarteners, even though my age group is Rising First through Third Graders. The book is *Will I Have a Friend* by Miriam Cohen. To my amazement, even the third graders are spellbound during the reading. They all are wondering "Will I have a friend." We talk about this question in their minds and I affirm that they all will have friends that week. As children get older, they remember their friends from year to year. For those ages, it is important to encourage them to welcome new friends along with old friends.

Games that Build Community and a Good Sense of Self

CCRC and AVP games build community by affirming two things: each individual and each individual as part of a group. Some of the games help us learn each others' names. When children know each other by name, they feel welcome. The sense of community grows. Working on learning names for several days helps create community as well as being a fun way to have each child and staff person's name be important for a moment.

I like to play Follow the Sound, Pass the Sound and Jump-in Exercise with the children. All of these games have similar elements: the child does an action with everyone else watching (affirming to the individual) and then the entire group repeats that action (affirming the collection of individuals as a group). It is a subtle thing that having everyone repeat your action makes most of us feel good about ourselves and about our group. An important caution is that

being in the spotlight may be uncomfortable for some children. When I teach each activity, I make certain that I include the rule that if you don't want to do that particular activity, say "pass." Again, this is a welcoming gesture. Kids are grateful to know they can pass at anytime.

Touch Blue is a favorite game as well. Touch Blue is an activity in which children touch the color the leader calls, but the color has to be on the clothing of another person. I suggest that it is a hard game because it requires us to be careful and gentle and also that I hope they are able to play it. The group always rises to the challenge of being careful and gentle. The only group who was not able to play this game was a group of three year olds on their first day of preschool. Reaching out and touching someone else was too scary for them. They couldn't do it. At Junior Gathering, I play this game on the third day. Reaching out and touching someone literally breaks down barriers and creates connectedness. As I call out colors to touch, I add "touch brown on someone you have not yet touched" or "touch elbows to elbows with someone new." I always end with "Touch your bottom to the floor on our circle." We are back as a group, ready to listen and do another activity.

There are many games that have the opportunity to spotlight one child and then have everyone, as a group, repeat the child's action. Those games are affirming and create community.

Setting Limits with Games

Games can have elements that can lead to boisterousness that breaks down community and leaves some children feeling uncomfortable or worse, hurt. In teaching each game, include a discussion of limits. For instance, in Jump-In Exercise, each child jumps into the circle making a movement that we will copy. I ask them what would happen if I jumped into the middle of the circle and then we all did it together. They see that we would have some banged up arms or heads so they tend to restrain themselves. Nevertheless, within a few rounds, there will be at least one child who jumps into the circle in such a way that we all would get bumped, at best, if we repeated the jump. I ask the child to think of another way to jump-in whereby we wouldn't get hurt. If a child jumps in hurtful ways when we all jump together, she is asked to sit out the next jump. For most children, once he has sat out a jump and settled down a bit, he is able to stand up again and join us for the next jump. These children tend to take the brief break without feeling mistreated. In my experience, when we are able to keep children from losing self-control, they feel more comfortable than when we don't help them stay in safe boundaries. Comfortably teaching safe boundaries in games and in play is a way of being welcoming and building community.

The principles in CCRC games and in AVP games are the same. Find games that are suitable for your age group and watch your group of children become a connected group who value and care for each other. Even when conflict arises, if they feel good about themselves and about their group, they will be open to figuring out how to work through the conflict.

Building Community Through Content

No matter your central content, if you have multiple choices for the children, they will feel there is a place for them. Schedule times during the day where children get to choose from a varied

set of activities. Schedule other times when you work as a group. By having active and quiet, free-choice activities and group times, play and stories, worship and singing, you will create an environment where children feel important and nurtured and hopefully they will experience through your staff and your program the presence of God's love working in their group and in their hearts.

References

Friendly Classroom for a Small Planet by Priscilla Prutzman, et. al. Children's Creative Response to Conflict, Box 271, Nyack, NY 10960. (914) 353-1796. ccrnyack@ad.com

Opening Doors to Quaker Religious Education by Mary Snyder, © 1999, Friends General Conference

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