

Guaranteed to Warm Up Groups

Ice Breaker Activities

by Karen Stephens

If you're a director, you're well aware that group dynamics plays a major role in the success — or dysfunction — of a staff. The extent to which staff respects each other, and genuinely knows and appreciates each other, has a great impact on attitude and job performance.

Whether you're orienting new staff, conducting a staff meeting, or offering a training workshop, a director's continual challenge is keeping staff dynamics respectful, warm, engaging, and vital.

When energy comfortably flows between participants, the group's creativity and problem solving quotient shoots up. They'll be less defensive, more likely to share unique ideas, and will maintain an open mind to suggestions.

Whether you have a long-time staff or one that rotates more than you'd like, icebreaker activities listed in this article will nudge any group toward animated interaction.

Though you'll have favorite icebreakers, don't rely on just one or two. As individuals vary, so will warm up styles. Some may need movement to get energy flow-

ing, others will like relaxing objects to manipulate, others need humor to keep engaged. Most of the ideas work best with a group of 20 or less.

Choose icebreakers based on the time you have available and how important it is for members to get to know each other. A three-day staff retreat provides (and requires!) more time for icebreaker activities; a one or two hour workshop does not.

That said, here's a bevy of warming activities to try. Check out the references listed, too; they offer many more ideas.

Pebbles in a Pond

Goal: To relax participants with a sensory activity. To acquaint group members.

Materials: A variety of colors of

smooth, mirrored pebbles (the ones used in vase bases). Containers for each color of pebble. Embroidery hoop for each participant.

Process: As group members enter, encourage them to make designs using the pebbles and the hoops. Then ask people to grab a handful of pebbles. Go around the group, and for every pebble a participant picked up, ask them to share one thing about themselves. Most start with names, but from there it can go from the sublime to the humorous.

Training Event Wishing Well

Goal: To introduce and give insight into individual goals.

Materials: One kiddie pool or a representation of one made with fabric, paper or blocks. One penny for each participant.

Process: Set the kiddie pool in the middle of the group. Tell members they will each get a turn to make a wish for what they hope to gain from the training. One at a time members go up, state their name, and then make a wish while tossing a penny into the pool over their shoulder.

One Very Wonderful Thing

Goal: To introduce while acquainting participants with each other's uniqueness.

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Materials: Letter sent to each participant asking them to bring one very special item to your meeting that will reveal something personal about them. Item suggestions may include memorabilia or keepsakes from teaching, family, vacation or childhood experiences.

Process: At the beginning of your meeting, ask each person to share their name and explain the significance of their One Very Wonderful Thing.



Fortune Cookie Kick-Off

Goal: To bring an upbeat, humorous tone to introductions.

Materials: One fortune cookie for each member.

Process: After each person states their name, they read their fortune and share it with the group. Ask each person to elaborate if the fortune rings true or false — the more humor the better.

Candy M&M Trick

Goal: To have fun and encourage detailed introductions.

Materials: Large bag of M&M's, small paper cup and napkin for each person.

Process: Pass the bag and encourage each member to use their cup to scoop as many candies as they wish. However,

they must wait to eat them until after introductions. To begin the meeting, ask each person to count the number of M&M's they took. During introductions, each member must share one personal tidbit for each M&M they took.

Variation: Pass out a roll of toilet paper and ask members to take as much from the roll as they think they'd need in a week. Once introductions begin, tell members they must share one personal

tidbit for every square of toilet paper they took.

Jelly Bean Sharing

Goal: To have fun and give structure to introductions for reticent participants.

Materials: Large bag of jelly beans with a variety of

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colors, small paper cup and napkin for each person. A large sign (poster or chalkboard) assigning discussion starter attributes for each jelly bean color. For instance:

- red = family;
- yellow = birthplace;
- green = favorite movie;
- black = favorite children's book;
- white = most embarrassing moment;
- purple = favorite childhood memory;
- orange = goals for the future;
- brown = hobbies;
- speckled = favorite exercise;
- blue = most unusual friend.

Process: Individuals scoop jelly beans into their cup, and then wait to eat them

until given the go-ahead. As introductions begin, instruct each person to pool their jelly beans onto their napkin. Using the attributes poster for reference, individuals introduce themselves and share information based on their jelly bean colors.

Famous Couples Match-up

Goal: To be a fun mixer.

Materials: Index cards, each with a name of a person who is part of a famous couple. Suggestions: Bonnie and Clyde; Lucy and Ethel; Will and Grace; Bogey and Bacall; Sonny and Cher; Barbie and Ken; Bill and Hilary; Fred and Barney; Batman and Robin; Lady and the Tramp; Antony and Cleopatra; Mutt and Jeff; Captain Kangaroo and Mr. Green Jeans; Kermit and Miss Piggy; Barny Fife and Andy Griffith.

Process: Each person gets a card. The group mingles to find their famous partner. Once a partner is found, individuals interview each other so they can then introduce the partner to the group. To add laughs, have the pairs go by their famous couple names for the entire event.

Truth, Truth, Lie

Goal: To set a playful, creative atmosphere for introductions.

Materials: None

Process: Each individual tells three things about himself. Two things must be true and one a lie. Then the group guesses what the lie is. Laughs are in store as members try to trick each other with tall tales and unexpected true trivia.

Me, Too!

Goal: To identify common interests and build bonds.

Materials: None

Process: Group members find a partner they don't know. Then they must discover at least three things outside of their profession that they have in common. During introductions, partners reveal their commonalities.

Get That Autograph

Goal: To encourage mingling and to identify common interests.

Materials: An autograph sheet for each member. On the sheet, list a variety of traits, preferences or experiences, such as: Likes to ski; Speaks another language; Sings in the shower; Can change a tire; Has a tattoo; Has a twin; Tap dances; Keeps a journal; Enjoys water coloring; Went to a conference in the last year; Likes reading; Plants a garden; Has crossed the equator; Works with toddlers; Balances checkbook monthly; Sold Girl Scout cookies; Climbed a mountain.

Process: Participants mingle with others and ask them to autograph their sheet next to the trait that applies to them. If you want to do a win/lose game, award a prize to the person who gets the most autographs.

Variation: Require sentence completion on the autograph sheets. Members then find others who answered statements as they did. This icebreaker can be tailor made to your event topic. For instance, training on literacy could have an autograph sheet with items such as:

My favorite childhood book was _____.

During childhood, the person who read to me most often was _____.

If I could be any book character it would be _____.

My favorite children's author is _____.

Name Tag Revelations

Goal: To provide a creative, hands-on way for members to reveal uniqueness.

Materials: Name tags, lots of markers and stickers for decorating name tags.

Process: Upon arrival, participants write their name at the top of their name tag. Beneath their name they draw three objects that represent an aspect of their personality or life. (For instance, a photo buff would draw a camera.) The relevance of the name tag drawings is shared during introductions.

Clearing the Air

Goal: To encourage relaxation so participants can be receptive to training.

Materials: Bottle of bubble solution and blowing wand for each participant.

Process: Once the group is seated, pass out the bubble toys. Ask each person for a short introduction, including one concern or worry from the day. Once introductions are finished, blow bubbles together. Tell participants to imagine the bubbles lifting and carrying the day's frustrations from their shoulders.

Variation: Balloon Pop. Have participants share a worry, write it on a slip of paper, and then put it into a balloon.

After introductions, everyone can blow up their balloon and then pop their worries away. (Encourage deep, relaxing breathing — but not hyperventilation!)

Variation: Bubble Wrap Hop. Give everyone a sheet of bubble wrap packing and a permanent marker. After introductions, each member writes a lingering frustration on their bubble wrap and then jumps on the wrap to stomp the worry away.

Revel in the Quirks

Goal: To accept, respect, and delight in differences among individuals.

Materials: None.

Process: With his or her personal introduction, each person shares a self-deprecating or humorous pet peeve.

Examples: Someone not putting a new box of latex gloves at the diaper station after taking the last one; someone not replacing a toilet roll; or someone leaving jelly in the peanut butter jar when making sandwiches.

Variation: If staff already knows each other, have participants write pet peeves on a chalkboard when entering. During introductions members guess each other's pet peeve.

Name Games:

Short, Sweet or Sassy

Goal: To provide comical, creative associations that help participants remember names.

Materials: None.

Process: People introduce themselves using a descriptor that starts with the same letter as their name. As you go around the group, each person must introduce those who came before them — including the descriptor — before they introduce themselves.

Example: "Jester Jessie; Lyrical Lily; Gabby Grace; and I'm Jamming Jake."

Variation: Each person must introduce themselves with an adjective as well as a movement. Before people state their own name, they must introduce those before them with their associated adjective and movement.

Variation: Use vegetable or animal names for descriptors, such as Susy the Snake or Eddie the Eggplant.

Photo Match-ups

Goal: To encourage mingling and honor each other's childhood.

Materials: Letter asking individuals to bring a personal childhood photo as well as a current photo. Scotch tape to mount photos onto a large section of wall.

Process: Without letting others see their photos, participants tape their two photos in two different places. To begin the meeting, ask the group to find as many child/adult matches as they can. Once matches are made and introductions begin, have participants share the significance of their photos.

Moving Spotlight

Goal: To build team unity and appreciation for individuals' strengths, talents, and contributions.

Materials: Fun flashlight, i.e. covered with colored cellophane, to shine on a spotlighted person.

Process: Group stands in a circle. Select a person to begin. Ask them to introduce the person to their right so that person can be spotlighted. Continue around the group and have each person in the circle cite something they admire about the person in the spotlight. Once everyone

contributes a compliment, spotlight the next person in the circle. Go around the circle until everyone has been recognized.

Magic Wand for Goal Setting

Goal: To reveal individual's goals and encourage collaboration.

Materials: Fanciful magic wand for each member, either homemade or store-bought.

Process: As participants arrive, hand each of them a magic wand. Tell them to imagine the wand could make a work-site goal come true. Go around the group and ask them to share their name and goal. After goals are revealed, divide into groups to brainstorm and plan ways of achieving goals.

Variation: Give each member a toy kaleidoscope or a pair of magic glasses. Have them look through the items to see the future. Ask them to share what they would like to see happen in their classroom in the coming month or year.

Childhood Reflections

Goal: To move beyond superficial introductions. To honor childhood experiences and encourage participants to use them as a guide for current practice.

Materials: Letter sent to participants asking them to reflect upon a set of questions prior to a training event. (Questions I used prior to an environments workshop are listed below. However, you can tailor make questions to any training topic.)

Process: Participants share answers with the group.

1. During childhood, where was your favorite place to be? What did you consider beautiful? What fascinated you? What feelings and sensations did it evoke? Recall the sounds, textures, patterns or even scent of it.
2. Describe play activities and settings that fully engaged you in childhood; the ones you could do for long periods with no sense of time passing. What was it about them that maintained your full, extended attention so completely?

3. What places or spaces relaxed you most in childhood? What and/or who calmed you most easily?
4. What places or spaces scared you most as a child?

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