

Your students' learning will be much more effective when they are involved in the process of learning through discovery and discussion rather than simply sitting and listening. In conducting good discussions, the teacher's challenge is to ask the right questions, keep the conversation focused on the lesson topic, and to involve all students.

### Good Preparation

**Write good questions before class.** Good discussions occur when the teacher knows what questions to ask. Study the class material thoroughly and think through the discussion questions provided in your curriculum. Think of an additional questions to ask as well. Avoid questions with obvious one-word answers. Discussion grows out of questions that ask for opinions, ideas, reactions, etc., not just repeating factual answers.

**Limit the discussion.** Younger children are not able to remain interested during long times of discussion. Children's physical requirements for movement need to be met. It's better to end the discussion time before children grow restless. Most discussions should be tied to some physical activity, either as an introduction to the activity, as a break during the activity or as a summary after the activity. Older students can maintain focus during discussions or much longer periods of time, but remain sensitive to signs of distraction and provide needed changes of pace, even if only a stand-and-stretch break.

**Involve everyone.** Try to involve all students in a discussion. Start by asking several easy, low-threat questions that all are capable of answering. Seek to involve the potentially disruptive student right at the start. Children are less likely to be disruptive when they're occupied. If a student looks restless, call him or her by name and ask a question. Also ask questions of children who are quiet and easily overlooked. Questions that ask for opinions, not information are best for involving reluctant speakers; students are very sensitive about being embarrassed in front of their peers.

**Be prepared for silence.** Sometimes students will respond to a question with silence. Silence can be good if students are pondering a deep question, but it can be counterproductive if silence is due to lack of understanding, embarrassment or boredom.

Give students a few seconds to think about the question. Ask for a visual sign (thumb up, fist on chin, etc.) when students think they may have at least part of the answer. Rephrase the question in case the first question was not understood. If children still are unable to answer, you might share the answer you would give and then ask for other ideas before moving on to another question.

Some children may feel uncomfortable speaking in front of a large class. Divide the class into small groups of six or fewer in which to discuss the answers. Provide each group with large sheets of paper on which to write their answers. Then a volunteer from each group may share

the replies with the whole class. Small groups are also good for discussing sensitive or personal topics.

Sometimes children do not respond when the questions are too easy, too obvious (Does God want us to help our neighbors?), too personal (What sins have you committed this week?), or too difficult (According to legend, what are the names of the three wise men?). After class, revise the questions that failed to get a good response and use the improvements as a model for writing good questions for the next class.

Sometimes students will give the answer they think the teacher wants to hear. Write open-ended questions that are more challenging: How would you feel if you had been a shepherd who was off-duty the night the angels appeared? What do you think the blind man did after Jesus healed him? How can you defend your friend from a bully?

### Handling Interruptions

**Get back on track.** Despite the best plans, a discussion may veer off course. First, determine if the new topic is valid. Perhaps one student is overly focused on a small detail (such as how Joshua could make the sun stand still when in reality the Earth moves) but the rest of the class is not interested. Acknowledge that the new topic is interesting and can be discussed at another time, and then return to the original topic. Restate the last question and if students do not respond, try another question.

If a child deliberately wants to move discussion off the topic, try using humor to return to the topic. If students digress because they don't understand the topic or the question, use a simpler question or take time to explain the topic.

Discussion off the topic is not always cause for alarm. Sometimes a child needs to discuss a topic not on the agenda or finds an unexplored point in the topic. If the new topic will help children apply Scriptural truth to everyday life and will benefit the entire class, stay with it.

**Go with the flow.** Interruptions will happen. If the interruption is minor and the children are not unduly distracted, ignore it and continue. Some interruptions require the teacher to stop and take care of matters: a child needs to leave early, an adult arrives to make an announcement. Try to get the class back on track after the interruption. If the class has grown too distracted, move on to another activity.