

A hush hangs over the circle of seventh graders while eager anticipation spreads throughout the room. Everyone knows it's Wednesday and in Mr. Delaney's room Wednesdays are special. His 12 advisees sit with him on the floor. The lights are dimmed. Nobody enters or leaves....

"If your parents could invisibly follow you through an entire school day, what would they be surprised to learn about you?" Mr. Delaney asks.

The students wiggle. Some look at a friend across the way while others look at the floor. One boy clears his throat and raises his hand. Mr. Delaney calls on him.

Kid-to-Kid

life's challenges with confidence and trust. Thus, a team of

Guiding Our Students Toward Self-Confidence and

By Marcia Rogat

"My parents would be shocked at how hard I'm working and how stressed-out I get. They think my day at school is fun, but they would see how hard it really is."

Heads nod, and a girl speaks next: "I would never want my parents here! They think my friends and I are all innocent and sweet. They'd probably pull me out of this school as soon as they heard our first conversation in the locker room!"

"My mom would freak out when she found out that I never eat lunch!" offers another student.

After three or four more comments, Mr. Delaney poses another question. "Sometimes teens purposely keep certain things secret from their parents. Why do you think this happens?"

Mr. Delaney and his students are engaged in a group discussion program called Kid-to-Kid, designed to help students discover their own voice, reflect on feelings, listen to others respectfully, and gain new awareness.

With a commitment to helping students become better self-advocates who have greater confidence in themselves and greater empathy for others, Kid-to-Kid lets students connect with their peers in an environment where it is safe to be honest, where feelings and thoughts can be expressed without fear of judgment, and where the teacher talks less than the students.

Giving Students Voice

After 20 years of working with young teens as both a teacher and a middle school counselor, I realized that students need-

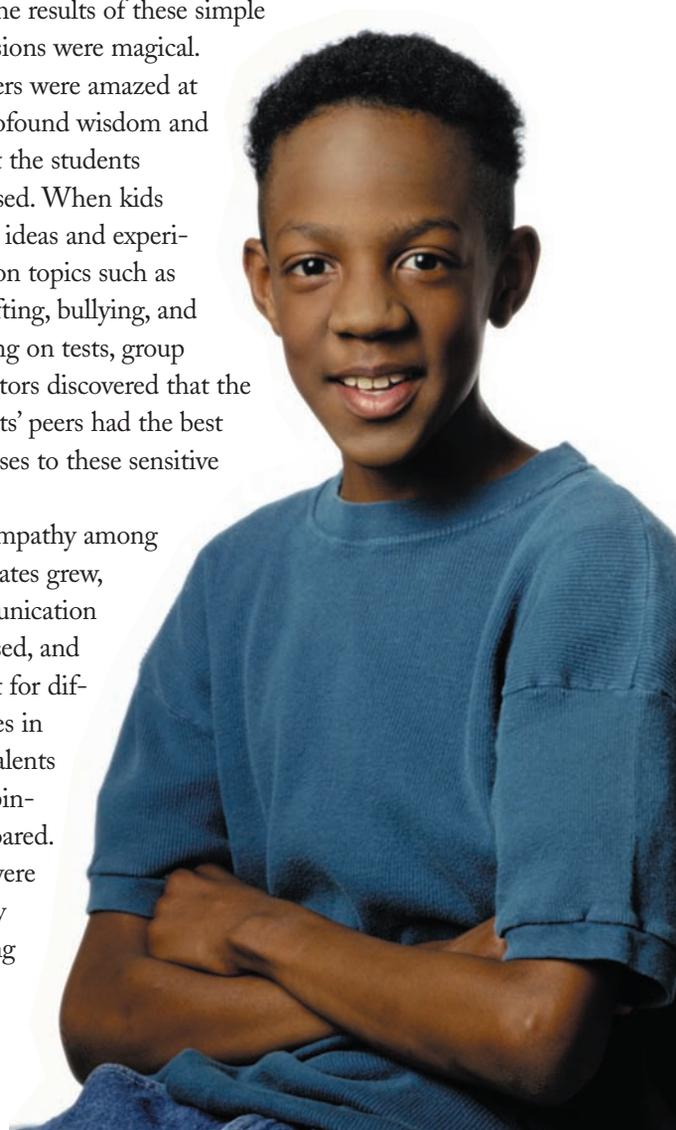
ed a means of truly hearing one another and learning from peers whose life experiences are vastly different than their own. So much of a student's school day is spent listening to teachers talk, absorbing information from textbooks, or answering fact-based questions. Students need a place to reflect upon their own feelings and to process what is happening to them in their day-to-day life. They deserve to know their classmates as fellow human beings with similar worries, fears, and dreams.

I desperately wanted to empower students to deal with

advisers and I began to experiment with weekly student-centered discussions on topics such as honesty, peer pressure, diversity, and relationships.

The results of these simple discussions were magical. Teachers were amazed at the profound wisdom and insight the students expressed. When kids shared ideas and experiences on topics such as shoplifting, bullying, and cheating on tests, group facilitators discovered that the students' peers had the best responses to these sensitive issues.

Empathy among classmates grew, communication increased, and respect for differences in both talents and opinions soared. Kids were quickly learning



that no two people have exactly the same experiences in life and that everyone's perspective is unique and valuable. They were also learning how to "listen for differences" with an openness to new understanding rather than reacting with arguments or defensiveness.

I really knew that Kid-to-Kid discussions were working when one of my colleagues, a strictly traditional math teacher who strongly resisted doing anything outside her curriculum, was hooked after her first discussion with kids. She had agreed to the discussion at the urging of fellow teachers, letting them know she was sure it would be a waste of time. She sat in a circle with 16 advisees and tossed out some questions on peer pressure and popularity. Thirty minutes later she came running up to me, flushed and smiling. "It was wonderful! The kids loved it, and I learned so much about their world!"

Her entire understanding of young adolescents had

changed and, as a result, her approach to teaching math also became more flexible. In addition, her students saw her as someone more caring, more in touch with them, and more accepting of their needs. She now holds discussions weekly with her advisees and monthly with her math classes.

Personal Power

Getting Started

Any teacher or adviser can successfully facilitate group discussions with students. A single teacher can decide to do this independently, thus making a

profound difference in a few children's lives, or a whole grade level or school can decide to do it together, creating a positive impact on the entire school culture. Following are a few simple guidelines for getting started:

1. Set the stage. Let students know this is different than a class lesson. Have them sit in a circle, preferably without desks, so that everyone is on an equal level and everyone can see everyone else. Dim the lights. Put away all books, papers, and pencils.

2. Establish ground rules with the group. The most basic rules might include:

- Everyone's thoughts and feelings are respected regardless of whether or not we agree with the ideas expressed.
- Everyone has the right to be heard by the group.
- Whatever is shared during discussions is confidential and no one will repeat outside of this group anything that has been said here (except where the facilitator must report by law due to endangerment).
- Identities will be kept anonymous when referring to other individuals who may be known by group members.

3. As the facilitator, sit on the same level as the students. Define your role as clarifier and questioner, never as lecturer or advice-giver. Determine to talk as little as possible. Maintain ground rules.

4. Know that it is not your responsibility to solve whatever problems are brought up. You are there to help kids listen to one another respectfully, to share their ideas, to trust themselves, and to articulate feelings. If you are in doubt about your need to act upon something brought forth, consult with your school counselor for direction.

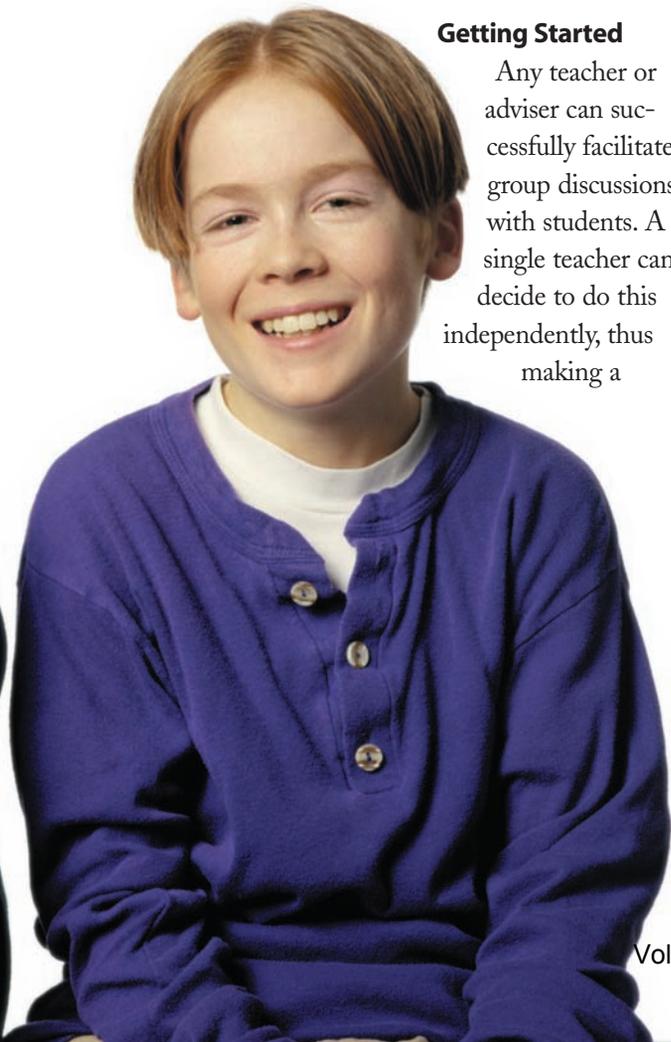
5. Remember to laugh! Discussions do not have to be serious every minute, and learning really can be fun! A facilitator who can remember not to take himself or herself too seriously will easily model this gift of lightheartedness for students.

Jumping In

You are now ready to lead your first discussion. But what do you talk about? You can obtain a copy of *Kid-to-Kid* through NMSA (www.nmsa.org). It offers more than 50 sets of questions on a variety of age-appropriate topics. Or, you can easily generate your own questions!

First, brainstorm a list of words that pique your interest when you think of middle school students, such as

- Joy
- Honesty
- Peer Pressure
- Tolerance



- Personal Power
- Grief
- Bullying
- Relationships
- Friendship
- Grades
- Parents
- School.

Next, go back to the words that attract you and begin writing open-ended questions. For example, for the word, “joy,” you might ask:

- What is something that you notice or do every day that brings you joy?
- When you are happy, how do you share your feelings with others?
- Why is it sometimes easier to share hurt and anger with others than to share joyful feelings?
- Tell us about a time when you found it hard to be happy for someone else.

Finally, divide and compile your questions into sets (usually five or six questions) that will sustain a 20–30 minute discussion. If you and your colleagues spend 30 minutes doing this together at a team meeting, you will have enough material to last everyone at least a semester if not the whole year!

Acknowledging Results

Facilitating classroom discussions does not take great skill, but it does take courage and commitment. When we listen to students sharing, they become real people with thoughts, feelings, passions, and dreams. In connecting with the greater lives of our students, we become their mentors, their confidants, and their wizened elders.

Recognizing this responsibility is often

what sets us running off in the opposite direction! But if we can muster the courage to turn back around and face both our students and ourselves, we’ll reap enormous rewards.

Our willingness to know our students on many different levels means we have acknowledged the profound interconnectedness of life: we have committed to embracing every individual as a valuable contributor to the whole.

Mustering the courage to do this means we believe in ourselves and in our youth. It means we believe in the capacity of the human heart to open, to trust, to love, and to grow. Empowering our students to be their very best selves means that we also are willing to take courageous steps in personal growth.

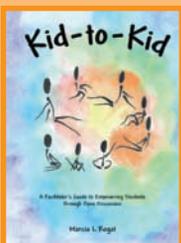
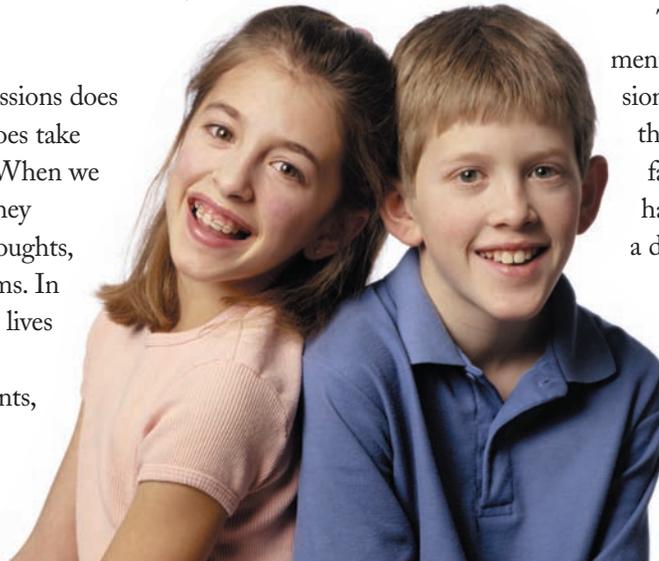
To keep ourselves on track, we can remind each other that our efforts give our students a great gift. We are empowering them with a belief in their ability to navigate

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an often confusing and complex world. We convey trust in their ability to reason, their desire for fairness, and their capacity for wisdom. Once these young people begin to trust who they are, they discover that they, too, can go forward with courage.

Thus the circle of empowerment, responsibility, and compassion grows. May we forever have the courage to convey a greater faith in our children than they have in themselves. You do make a difference. ■

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Kid-to-Kid offers teachers, counselors, and advisers an opportunity to guide young adolescents toward personal empowerment through dynamic and meaningful group discussions. Each topic contains specific easy-to-use questions that gently lead students toward fresh insight and increased awareness as they participate in both speaking and listening with an open heart. To order visit www.nmsa.org or call NMSA at 800-528-NMSA (6672).