

Adapting for younger students

Small-group discussions for younger students will be shorter and more structured than discussions for older students; the questions will also require more follow-up questions.

Teachers may select from many structures and techniques for peer-led discussions, including the following:

- Describe and assign a role to each student (e.g., posing questions or keeping the group on task) to ensure that all students participate in the discussion.
- Have students discuss the predictions or summaries of their peers as they use their reading comprehension strategies (see Recommendation 1). The panel cautions that this approach may be difficult for kindergartners and 1st graders.
- Give students higher-order questions, graphics, or pictures, and ask them to discuss the materials with a partner. The panel recommends this approach for students in kindergarten and 1st grade or as a warm-up for a more challenging discussion for students in 2nd and 3rd grades.
- Ask students to make up questions that get them thinking. For example, give students question stems (see step 2), and have them fill in the blanks and ask the questions of one another.⁷⁸ Rotate the responsibility for coming up with a “thinking question.” For younger students, provide question stems orally or use word banks or picture clues to remind them how to build questions that make them think.
- After students read a text or a section of a text, guide them to reflect on the text by asking them to draw or write in a journal as preparation for a discussion the next day. Explain to them that the entries should be questions or concerns they want to raise with their peers in discussion.⁷⁹ Teachers can support younger students by giving them sticky notes with symbols (e.g., question marks, smiley faces, or exclamation points) to mark sections of the text they want to talk about.

Kindergarten through 3rd-grade students will need extensive modeling and practice to be successful in peer-led discussions. The discussions should start out short and become longer as students get older and have more practice. Introducing the entire activity and its rules (e.g., taking turns, not dominating the discussion, and staying on task) before group work begins will prepare students for it.⁸⁰ Teachers can then use simple tools such as the ones listed below to encourage students to participate fully and fairly:

- Give students a chart of rules (with picture clues for younger students) to remind them of appropriate behavior in peer-led discussions.⁸¹
- Consider setting a rule that no one can talk more than three times until everyone has spoken once.⁸² To keep track, consider giving students chips before the discussion begins and having them turn one in each time they talk.
- Require students to prepare ahead of time. Ask them to reflect on specific questions about the text by drawing a picture or writing in a “reading log” before the discussion, or have them talk in small groups before the full class discussion.⁸³
- Give students time to formulate their thoughts. When moderating the discussion, wait in silence until many students raise their hands, and call on those who have not yet contributed.⁸⁴

Key reminders

Because it will take time for students to understand how to moderate their own discussions, it is imperative that teachers provide scaffolding and practice to support the students' growth in this area (e.g., asking them to clarify what they mean, whether they agree with a prior statement, or whether there is more to add before moving on to the next topic⁸⁵). For additional support, students in the upper elementary grades may help model peer-led discussion for younger students.⁸⁶