



Mentoring Refugee, Immigrant & Newcomer Children and Youth

Conversation Club



Conversation Club

A conversation club is a group mentoring exercise. It allows newcomer and refugee youth to learn and practice English, and to learn about local culture. It also offers intercultural learning opportunities, as mentors learn about the culture and customs of participants. Conversation clubs can also have the added benefit of developing a caring relationship between a child and an adult or older individual. By creating a relationship based on trust and open communication, mentors help kids foster a sense of belonging, build self-confidence and learn new skills and passions. In order to gain the full benefits of the relationship between the mentor and mentee, ensure the match remains consistent week after week so as to develop a deeper level of trust and connection.

Why Start a Conversation Club?

If your community has newcomer and refugee youth, a conversation club is a proven way of helping improve their language skills and knowledge of local culture.

How a Conversation Club Works

A conversation club is comprised of New Canadians, and longer-term residents with strong English language skills. They meet regularly, usually once or twice a week, and hold discussion either as a full group, in smaller groups, or one-on-one. Activities may be self-directed or led by a program staff or volunteer.

Benefits for Newcomer and Refugee Youth

Conversation clubs may be particularly valuable for new Canadians, such as refugees and newcomers. For most, English is not their first language, nor the language spoken at home. Finding opportunities to improve their language skills will help them with school, work opportunities, and social engagement.

Conversation clubs also offer an intercultural learning opportunity. Participants will learn about Canadian culture and customs, while also having the opportunity to share their own culture with mentors. This is enriching for everyone involved.

Getting Started

Before you launch your program, determine the following:

Staff Resources

Do you have the staff in place to run this program? Volunteer recruitment and management will take time, as will liaising with the families of participants, and program partners.

Volunteer Resources Needed

Identify how many volunteer resources you will require, and for what roles. Beyond mentors, you may need volunteers to oversee the program, raise funds or secure donations of items, or to help with administrative tasks.

Funding Your Program

Your program will incur costs, some of which may be off-set by in-kind donations. Space, food and refreshments, supplies and materials will all cost money. You may be able to secure in-kind space, or donations of goods through sponsorship. Companies can be targeted for both in-kind and financial sponsorship. Service groups, and agencies such as the United Way or your local community foundation are potential funders as well.

Target Audience – Youth and Mentors

Will your club serve one age group or level of school?

Where will you find your mentors? Do you want mentors to come from a specific demographic, or any age?

Finding Space

The space should be easy to get to for everyone involved, particularly the participants.

Using school spaces is the best starting point, as it removes any travel time for participants. Schools are also a trusted place for the families of newcomers.

If that's not an option, nearby space may be available through agencies like the Boys & Girls Club or Big Brothers Big Sisters, a community centre, or faith organization.

Accessibility is also important for mentors. If your mentors are high school or university students, is it walkable or easily accessible by transit? Is there free or low cost parking available?

Conversation Club in Action

Here is what the schedule might look like:

3:30 - Start

Introductions, snacks provided.

3:40 – Introduction of Activity or Activities

A facilitator or coordinator sets the stage, introducing the format and activities for the next hour.

3:45 – Conversation Club

Participants and mentors engage in conversation and activities, whether in groups or one-on-one

4:30 – Wrap-Up

Participants and mentors share their learnings, and experience with the day's activities.

4:45 - Close

Participants are picked up by their parents or other relatives, or bussed home.



Conversation Club Activities

Examples of activities can include:

- **Questions:** one person thinks of a person, place, or thing. The rest of the room takes turns asking questions until someone guesses correctly.
- **Stories:** in one-on-one pairings, mentors and participants each share a story about a past experience, such as a place they've been, or movie they watched. The other person asks questions.

Recruiting Participants

After deciding on your age group, you can seek out participants in the following ways:

- Talk to teachers and school administrators to see if your program is a fit, and if they can recommend students or promote the program to parents (use AMP tools to promote mentoring in schools - [See Making Connections](#)).
- Put up posters in your community, or where allowed at buildings like recreation centres, community halls, or non-profits.
 - Work with faith organizations to build bridges and encourage participation.

Recruiting Mentors

There are many places and ways to find mentors. Here are a few ways:

- Schools and school districts, who can identify students who can be good mentors.
- Student groups such as Rotaract and Circle K with a service mandate.
- Service clubs, such as Rotary or Lions Clubs.
- Businesses that are looking for group volunteering opportunities.

Mentor Orientation

A successful orientation will set up mentors for a positive, rewarding experience. Key things to include in an orientation:

- Examples of material a participant may be working with.
- A mock mentoring session, to show what to do and what not to do.
- Information on any cultural barriers or customs that a mentor may not be aware of.
- A list of tips for a mentor to prompt a participant or to encourage them.

Tips for a Successful Conversation Club

- Be clear on the time commitment and length.
- Encourage both participants and mentors to share their cultural experience, and to learn about the culture of others.
- No use of cell phones or other electronic devices.
- Have a list of topics ready for your participants.
- Encourage everyone to share their experiences and thoughts.

Summary: A Conversation Club in 10 Steps.

1. Pick an age group for participants and mentors.
2. Find a space and time.
3. Decide on a structure – one-on-one, group, a combination of both?
4. Recruit participants and mentors.
5. Set up a schedule with a list of possible activities for each session.
6. Train your mentors.
7. Start your program. Understand that it may take time for rapport to develop between mentors and participants.
8. Seek feedback from participants, their families, and mentors, informally during the program then through a formal evaluation (at least from parents and mentors) at the end.
9. Celebrate the successes
10. Refine your program for its next round and repeat.



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