
~ TRAINING SOLUTIONS ~

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USING WARM-UP ACTIVITIES EFFECTIVELY

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We design an opening activity to spark initial thinking on the topic. This is similar to what some call an icebreaker. However, it is designed to not only loosen up the group, but also give them a common experience to reflect on and discuss together.

Margie Carter and Deb Curtis

INTRODUCTION

While your experience as a participant may make you think otherwise, warm-up activities—sometimes referred to as “icebreakers”—can be more than fun or “catchy” ways to start a training session. An effective warm-up activity helps participants leave their busy lives behind and switch their focus to the learning experience about to occur in a workshop, class, or training session.

Just as participation in exercise improves when muscles are warmed up, active learning improves when the brain is “warmed up” prior to learning experiences. This enhancement does not happen by chance. A warm-up activity is meaningful only when a) you plan it with a goal or outcome clearly in mind, b) you describe it—either verbally or in writing—in enough detail that everyone knows what is expected of them, and c) you articulate the goal to participants. Selecting warm-up activities that are linked with the rest of the training makes it possible to weave the ideas generated during the warm-up activity into later parts of the session.

POTENTIAL OUTCOMES

Meaningful warm-up activities contribute to at least one or more of the following outcomes:

~ They “warm up” participant interaction by encouraging mixing and interpersonal connections among participants during a practical activity.

~ They “warm up” participants’ brains by introducing the topic or the issues to be addressed in the session.

~ They “warm up” participants’ ability to engage in lifelong learning practices by using approaches such as self-reflection or examination of personal beliefs.

~ They “warm up” participants’ involvement in teaching practices such as small group discussion, brainstorming, or role-play.

While all warm-up activities should have a specific purpose, any of the above outcomes can be accomplished through either lighthearted, playful activities or more reflective, contemplative activities, depending upon your goal and on the nature of the topic to be explored.

~ **When the Primary Outcome is Participant Interaction** This type of warm-up activity is designed primarily to initiate networking, help people get better acquainted with one another, and build a foundation for developing ongoing relationships both during and after the session. The activity may include sharing work-related information (details about their job or program) or topic-related information (interests, resources, past experiences). Warm-up activities to build connections help participants begin to feel safe in the learning environment and encourage discussion during subsequent learning activities. Without much effort, making connections is often a side effect of most warm-up activities. However, making connections can be planned as the primary outcome and the main focus of the activity, particularly when the members of the group may not know each other very well.

~ **When the Primary Outcome is Introduction to the Topic** Topic-focused warm-up activities help get participants thinking about the training content and jump-start the learning process. Activities such as Behavior Bingo (described below) and Hopes/Fears (participants make a list of their individual hopes and fears related to the topic) are examples of topic-focused warm-up activities. When carefully planned, a topic-focused warm-up also serves as a relatively accurate method for the trainer to assess participants' knowledge, skills, and attitudes regarding the topic of the session.

~ **When the Primary Outcome is Engagement in Lifelong Learning Practices** Warm-up activities can give participants experience using the dispositions and lifelong learning skills that impact learning and the ability to translate learning into daily practice. For example, a warm-up activity that asks individuals to reflect on a relevant quote requires using the disposition of self-reflection; an "attitude survey" requires the lifelong skill of individual examination of personal beliefs and values. Actively engaging in these types of activities helps participants determine what the training content means to them individually and make the most of the learning time. Development of these key dispositions and practices directly benefits participants both during the session and in their day-to-day work as early childhood professionals.

~ **When the Primary Outcome is Involvement in Teaching Practices** This type of warm-up activity gives participants an opportunity to engage in a teaching method that will be used during the session. When you are going to use small group work during the training session, you might select a warm-up activity that gets participants working in groups right away. For example, put distinct stickers on participants' name tags and ask them to find the other people with the same stickers, sit down, and introduce themselves. Depending on the learning outcomes you want, you may choose to a) assign individuals to small groups based on individual expertise or education, or b) let them sit in whatever groupings naturally occur. In any case, the warm-up activity could either start them working together in a group to complete the activity or result in their being grouped at completion of the activity.

MAKING IT WORK

Many warm-up activities can be adapted to different purposes and different topic areas. Let's look at a popular warm-up activity, such as "People Bingo." During this warm-up activity, participants are given a sheet of paper with a grid of squares that contain various information they can use to learn something about other participants. Instructions for completing the Bingo sheet usually ask participants to 1) introduce themselves to others in the room; 2) ask others the questions from the grid until a person answers "yes"; 3) write down the person's name and response in the appropriate box; and 4) move on to another person. When a participant completes five squares in a row (or 3 depending on the size of the grid), he or she has completed a "bingo." Depending on your goal, the time allotted, and the number of squares, participants may be required to fill in all the squares on the sheet before they complete a "bingo."

You may wish to offer a small "prize" for the first person to get a "bingo", perhaps a chocolate bar or fancy pen. However, to promote continued positive participation, you should provide a similar, smaller prize for the other participants simply in honor of their participation. For example, if candy bars are the prizes for completing a "bingo", individually wrapped candies could be distributed to everyone upon completion of the time for the activity.

~ **Bingo When the Primary Outcome is Participant Interaction** When the primary outcome is promoting interaction and building connections among participants during the warm-up activity, the information in the Bingo squares is about others' personal knowledge/background or about their programs. For example, the Bingo squares might include statements typical to early childhood professionals and their programs such as the ones in Early Childhood Bingo on the following page:

Early Childhood Bingo

I have a favorite circle time activity.	I know at least one other person at this session.	I know a good early childhood web site.	I find time to pursue a hobby.	My program is accredited.
I have a boy named Michael in my program/classroom.	I can name two children's books that represent diversity well.	I have a girl named Jessica in my program/classroom.	I participate in training at the resource and referral agency.	I have a CDA or AAS degree in early childhood.
I know how to get blue tempera paint out of a white shirt.	I am registered for the MT Early Childhood Conference.	FREE SPACE	My program is a family child care home.	I can name two children's book authors.
My program use the food program (CACFP).	I make a great children's snack.	I can name two children's books.	I am a member of MCCA or MAEYC.	My program is a group home.
My program is a center.	This training is for my Merit Pay award.	I own a copy of DAP.	I know my PSA number by heart.	I know a recipe for play dough.

~ **Bingo When the Primary Outcome is Introduction to the Topic** When the primary outcome is to provoke thinking about the training topic, this same Bingo game would include statements seeking connections with other participants around the topic. Below are several

examples of the types of statements you might use for the topic of Positive Behavior Guidance. When you use this size grid, you would need to have participants complete the whole page for a "bingo" or add many more statements and a larger grid.

Behavior Guidance Bingo

I have had a child in my program/classroom who bites other children.	I can name three resources a teacher could use when a child has challenging behavior.	I involve children in setting the rules for their own behavior in my program.
I have heard of Dan Gartrell.	I can define the term behavior guidance.	This is my first behavior guidance session.
I involve parents in planning children's developmental goals.	I include a behavior action plan in my parent information/handbook.	I came to this training with a specific behavior guidance issue in mind.

~ **Bingo When the Primary Outcome is Engagement in Lifelong Learning Practices** When the primary outcome is to promote engagement in individual lifelong learning practices, such as self-reflection, you can use statements that promote reflection relative to the

training topic or as an early childhood disposition. The following Self-Reflection Bingo game primarily gets people thinking about their childhood. To do this, the Bingo game might include such statements as:

Self-Reflection Bingo

My favorite toy as a child was a doll.	I grew up in the country.	I feel excited about this training!	Growing up I had my own bedroom.	I used to be _____, but now I am _____.
I look most like my mother.	I was an only child.	My favorite toy as a child was a stuffed animal.	I know enough about this topic to be a resource.	My favorite activity as a child was an inside game.
I grew up in a big city.	My favorite activity as a child was an outside game.	My mother had a job outside the home.	I look most like my father.	I come from a family of two children.
I am new to this topic.	I am the youngest child in my family.	My favorite toy as a child was a truck/car.	I come from a family of three children.	My mother was a stay-at-home mom.
I come from a family of more than four children.	My favorite toy as a child was a bicycle.	Growing up I shared a bedroom.	I am the oldest child in my family.	When I played outside as a child, I played _____.

~ **Bingo When the Primary Outcome is Involvement in Teaching Practices** To use Bingo to warm up group active learning skills, you might ask participants to work together with four or five people seated at round tables. In this case, the information in the squares of the Bingo grid could be the same as any previously described, with one sheet going to each group. However, you would use strategies designed to build collaboration among team members as they complete the Bingo sheet. Each group would complete the Bingo sheet as a team. Instructions might include these team-building steps: a) make certain each member understands the task (in this case, complete a "bingo" by finding other participants for which each statement is true), b) decide how best to accomplish the task, c) complete the task, d) finalize the task, and e) summarize their accomplishment, either in their small group or in a brief report to the larger group as a whole. Since this experience serves as a preview of the small group work they will be doing during the session, you will want to keep it simple. Later during the session, the small groups may be more structured (or not) and, at that time, you may wish to have members of each group take on various roles, such as recorder, time-keeper, facilitator, and cheerleader.

CONCLUSION

In reality, many warm-up activities can accomplish any one or all of the results described above. In any case, the warm-up activity you design should dovetail with the learning outcomes you identify for the knowledge and skills participants are about to learn. As you can see, you need to identify the outcomes you want from any warm-up activity you choose and adapt it to fit your goals. Other outcomes may naturally occur, but identifying your primary goal will help drive the selection and implementation of the warm-up activity itself and result in an activity that truly enhances learning. ~

RESOURCES*

- * *Teaching Adults: An Active Learning Approach* by Elizabeth Jones (1997). NAEYC: Washington, DC.
- * *Workshop Essentials: Planning and Presenting Dynamic Workshops* by Paula Jorde Bloom (2000). New Horizons: Lake Forest, IL.
- * *Training Teachers: A Harvest of Theory and Practice* by Margie Carter and Deb Curtis (1994). Redleaf Press: St. Paul, MN.

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If you have stories to share about implementing the ideas described in this issue, please address your comments to your training colleagues at trainerdirectoryexchange@listserv.montana.edu. If you have comments about the topic of this newsletter or ideas for topics to address in future issues, please contact:

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