

AFTON PHILLIPS
ADAM DUCKWORTH



the art of group talk

FREE SAMPLE

how to lead
better
conversations
with



kids
and preschoolers

“That shirt makes you look big.”

LEROY, KINDERGARTEN

“Is church your house?”

JUAN, 2-YEAR-OLD

**“I’ve never lied before . . .
but my sister has.”**

WALKER, 1ST GRADE

**“How come Kyle’s Elf on the Shelf
brings him gifts and mine doesn’t?”**

PRESTON, 4-YEAR-OLD

**“Last week, my uncle killed a snake
and put it in his freezer.”**

AVA, 4TH GRADE

**“One time I didn’t study for a test so I prayed
to God to help me and I got a B+.”**

ELLIE, 5TH GRADE

**“Jesus came to give us hope!
I hope that I go to the Bahamas.”**

JAMAL, 1ST GRADE

“My dog’s name is Stan.”

LEVI, 3-YEAR-OLD

**“My favorite vegetable is
pretzels and then carrots”**

JAMES, 4-YEAR-OLD

The Art of Group Talk: Kids

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Writers: Afton Phillips, Adam Duckworth

Lead Small Editing Team: Mike Jeffries, Steph Whitacre,

Elloa Davis, Adriana Howard

Art Direction: Ryan Boon

Project Manager: Nate Brandt

Design: FiveStone

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Foreword

This is a book about how to have better conversations with kids.

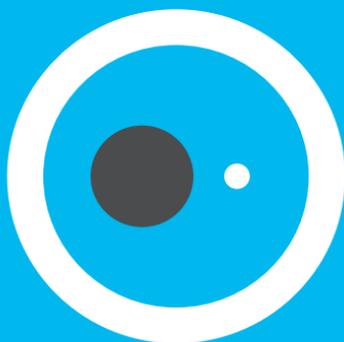
Because, as a small group leader, you lead a conversation with kids every single week. Conversations about . . .
their lives.
their dreams.
their friends.
their imaginary friends.
and their definitely-not friends.

And sometimes, you even manage to lead conversations about faith.

This is a book to remind you that your small group conversations—even the ones that don't go exactly as planned—**really matter.**

But there are a few ways to make your conversations **matter even more.**

**create a
safe place**



**clarify their
faith as
they grow**

Introduction

You probably signed up to be a small group leader (or SGL for short) because you wanted . . .
to make a big difference.
to change the world.
to invest in a few kids so you could help them develop a lifelong, authentic kind of faith.

We call that **leading small**.

Maybe you didn't know exactly what you were getting into when you signed up to be an SGL, but you probably at least knew this:

Leading a *small group* means leading a weekly small group *conversation*.

Kind of obvious, right?

But the truth is, figuring out how to lead a conversation with a group of kids isn't always obvious. It's definitely not like leading a conversation with a group of adults.

I learned this the hard way. When I (Afton) signed up to be an SGL, I had some pretty big expectations for how those weekly small group conversations should look. At the time, I thought leading a small group of kids would be pretty much like leading a conversation with a bunch of me's—but smaller. And louder. And more giggly.

Before I became an SGL, I expected to lead small group conversations where every kid . . .
paid attention.
participated.
maybe even cried
(but not because they poked themselves in the eye with a crayon).

^ attempted to lead
But then I ~~led~~ my first small group of kids and, well, you can guess how that went.

If you've been an SGL for more than five minutes, you already know what I learned that day—that leading a conversation with a group of kids doesn't always live up to your expectations. (Especially if your expectations looked anything like mine.)

In fact, if you have any SGL experience whatsoever, it's probably safe to say that **you know what it's like to have a small group conversation totally bomb.**

Maybe you led a small group where your kids weren't exactly talkative.
You tried to get the conversation moving, but you were met with . . .
the sound of crickets.
blank stares.
the tops of their heads as they try to break a record for how many crayons they can get through in a single group hour.

Or maybe they were a little too talkative.
Maybe you were forced to scream questions or instructions at the top of your lungs while they . . .
wrestled each other on the floor.
hid behind the tech booth.
asked you to judge their cartwheel competition.

Or maybe they were just the right amount of talkative, but you're convinced your volunteer training didn't prepare you for the kinds of topics they wanted to talk about.

When leading a small group of kids, sometimes you have to beg them to say something—*anything*.

But more often than not, you wish they would lose the ability to speak altogether.

And maybe sometimes, you head home after a particularly challenging small group and wonder,
“Did I say the right thing?
Were they even listening?
Do these conversations matter at all?”

If you've ever been there, you're not alone. Everyone who has ever led a small group of kids has, at some point, wondered if they were completely wasting their time. (We don't exactly have the data to support this claim, but we're still pretty sure it's true.)

Especially on days when your group spends more time turning their activity pages into paper airplanes than engaging in a conversation about faith, those questions are understandable.

But the next time a conversation goes completely off the rails and you're wondering if you're a terrible small group leader—or if you think leading a small group of preschoolers or elementary schoolers should be classified as a new form of torture—there are two things we hope you'll remember.

Here's the first:

Your small group conversations matter.

And we don't just mean those once-in-a-lifetime conversations

where everyone decides to accept Jesus into their hearts simultaneously—we mean every small group conversation. The one when Walker hid behind the furniture? It mattered. The one where you didn't finish any activities? It mattered. The one where your group wanted to know if God could make a mozzarella stick so hot even He couldn't eat it? It mattered.

And the conversation you're about to lead this week? Yep. It's going to matter, too.

The good news for SGLs like you and me is that the quality of the conversation you'll lead this week won't determine your ultimate success or failure as a small group leader. Sometimes a conversation will bomb, and that's okay, because that one conversation isn't the only conversation you'll ever have with your few (by "your few," we mean your small group.)

In the book *Lead Small*, we talked about the importance of showing up predictably—weekly, in fact—for your few. Actually, it's the very first thing we talked about. That's because showing up predictably, consistently, and regularly in the lives of the kids you lead is the foundation of leading your small group (and of leading a small group conversation).

When you show up predictably, you begin to understand that one conversation doesn't determine your success as a small group leader. Instead, you realize that your success is actually determined by every small group conversation you've ever had, added up and then multiplied by factors we haven't yet identified. Because when you combine the dozens, or hundreds, of conversations you've had with your small group, they equal something pretty significant. They equal . . .

Relationships.

Trust.

Influence.

So, you see, your small group conversations matter—even those conversations that are difficult or frustrating, or that don't exactly go according to plan. They matter because each of those weekly small group conversations is part of something bigger.

Ten years from now, the kids in your small group will probably not remember much of what was said during your small group conversations. But they will remember how those consistent, weekly conversations resulted in a relationship that made an impact on their lives. That's the power of showing up consistently.

So next time a small group conversation doesn't quite meet your expectations, remember: **Your small group conversations matter—maybe more than you think.**

But here's the second thing we hope you remember:

Your small group conversations can matter more.

In fact, that's what this book is all about—practical ideas and strategies to help you make the most out of your conversations with your small group.

While the one conversation you lead this week will not determine your success as a small group leader, it will affect it. The influence you're building through your weekly conversations is important, but if you never actually use that influence to help your few build a more authentic faith . . . then you've missed it.

But you're not going to miss it. We know that because you're reading a book about how to make your small group conversations matter more, and that's a pretty good sign. You're already on your way to leading better conversations—conversations where the kids in your group will not only be able to engage, but will be able to . . .

be themselves.
share their doubts.
ask tough questions.
share their struggles.

It isn't always easy to lead those kinds of conversations, though. So if you've ever looked at your small group of kids and wished you knew . . .

what to say
what not to say
what to ask
how to ask it
when to speak
when to listen
how to make them talk
how to make them stop talking
. . . then keep reading.

We don't know everything about leading conversations for kids, but we've spent a lot of time leading small groups, talking to other small group leaders, and learning how to lead small groups better. And now we want to take the things we've learned and share them with you. Things that, we hope, will help you make the most of your limited opportunities to lead a conversation with your small group

So remember.

Your small group conversations matter. They matter because, with every conversation you lead, you're building a relationship with your few that has the potential to influence them for a lifetime.

But your small group conversations can matter more.
And here's how . . .

chapter
one
prepare

Prepare

Picture this.

It's Saturday night. You've had a get-it-done weekend filled with cleaning your car, going to soccer games, shopping for groceries, mowing the lawn, and walking the dog, and your head finally hits the pillow for a restful night's sleep. Then your eyes spring open.

You realize . . .

You have to set your alarm for an unreasonably early hour to lead a small group of kids in the morning.

Ever been there? We sure have. Now, don't get us wrong. We love our small groups. We care about them. We're committed to them. We want to have great conversations together. But . . . well, we're not always as prepared for our conversations as we should be.

Maybe you can relate. Maybe you know what it's like to fly through the church doors, desperately searching through your phone for the email from your children's pastor about what in the world you're supposed to do and talk about in small group this week. You skim through as much as you can before kids show up, but then here comes your early bird. And it's a little tough to concentrate when your early bird is talking so much. And then another shows up. And another. And before you know it, they're all talking to you a million miles a minute and you're grunting out uh-huh as you take in as much information from the curriculum as you

can, wondering the whole time why your children's pastor handed you a baggie of loose glitter when you walked in and secretly hoping you run out of time before you get to that activity.

You make it through your small group time, but maybe the best part of the group was the very end, when you didn't have a sheet of paper in your face and you just talked to your few about what they heard in the story. Sure, it got the job done. If you've been with your group for some time, maybe your kids don't even notice how much you were winging it. But on your way home, you might have wondered, *What kind of conversation could we have had if I'd been just a little more prepared?*

If we're honest, we've all had weeks like that. It happens. But if you want to get serious about making your conversations with your few matter more (and we know you do), then we've got to talk about **preparation** because the first step in leading a better small group conversation is to . . .

PREPARE

We know. We know!

You're a volunteer. You don't get paid to lead a small group. You've inserted yourself into the busy and rapidly expanding worlds of a few kids and you're going to get absolutely nothing in return, except maybe a free T-shirt and some sugary donuts. You're already giving a ton of your time by showing up and leading these conversations, but now we're suggesting you should spend time preparing for those conversations, too?

Well, yes.

But it's simple. We promise!

There are four things you can do to prepare for your small

group conversations each week. And you can do them all from your couch.

If you want to prepare for your small group conversation, READ your email (and not on your phone while driving to group).

We know email is outdated. (That's why we created the Lead Small app*.) But we're grown ups. And since we're grown ups, we should probably still be checking—and reading—our emails.

We don't mean those emails about buy-one-get-one jeans or 25-percent-off sale items. Those emails probably won't help you prepare for your small group (although you should probably bookmark those).

We're talking about the weekly communication—via email, the Lead Small app, a Facebook group, or a carrier pigeon—from your children's pastor.

We may not know your children's pastor, but we're going to assume a few things about what they do every week. We're guessing your children's pastor or coach . . .

cares about your small group conversation.

thinks about your small group conversation.

has a plan for your small group conversation.

sends you the plan for your small group conversation.

Hopefully, that email from your children's pastor tells you important information like what they'll be teaching and what you'll be asking when you get to small group each week.

Ring any bells?

No?

Then you probably need to update your contact

information in the church database or check your Recently Deleted folder.

But if you've checked, and double checked, and are absolutely positive your children's pastor doesn't communicate with you weekly, try not to be too hard on them. We're sure they really want you to succeed as a small group leader! So don't get mad. If your children's pastor doesn't send you a weekly email, try this . . .

1. Open your email app.
2. Write a new message to your children's pastor.
3. Say something like this:

Hey _____! You know what would be really awesome? I would love to get an email every week, maybe a few days in advance, that helps me get ready for my small group. I think my small group conversations could be a lot better if I had a little time to think about what we're teaching and read my small group activities and questions before I get to small group. What do you think?

Pretty simple, right?

And if your children's pastor already sends you weekly updates, your job is even easier:

1. Open the email, Lead Small app, or your window (for the carrier pigeon).
2. Read it.

If you already do this, way to go! You are a very prepared SGL. And hey, here's a thought. If you love getting those emails in advance, take a second to hit "Reply" to your children's pastor's weekly email and say, "Thanks!" They'll love to hear their weekly emails aren't disappearing into inbox oblivion.

If you want this week's small group conversation to matter more, you need to know what the small group conversation will be about—you know, *before* you walk in the door.

Prepare for your small group conversation.

READ YOUR EMAIL.

If you want to prepare for your small group conversation, REHEARSE what you'll say.

Have you ever had an **imaginary conversation**?

Sure you have. Maybe it was when you were . . .

getting ready for a first date.

preparing for a job interview.

thinking of some killer comebacks for that troll on Facebook.

Having imaginary conversations simply means mentally rehearsing what you're going to say before you say it. Imaginary conversations are helpful when you're preparing for a date and they're helpful when you're preparing for your not-so-imaginary small group conversations, too.

We're not saying you should memorize lines or write a monologue for your small group conversation. In fact, please don't. **We're just saying that what you say can probably be said better if you rehearse what you're going to say (or not say) before you say it.**

Just like . . .

a surgeon practices before a procedure

a lawyer practices for a trial

a pilot practices in a flight simulator

you should practice for your small group conversation.

As an SGL, having an imaginary conversation means trying to anticipate how your small group conversation will go

before small group so you'll be less likely to be caught off-guard *during* small group

So how do you do that? Well, once you've read your email from your children's pastor, ask yourself a few questions **about what they'll be teaching**, like . . .

- What do my kids know, think, or feel about this topic?
- How does this topic relate to specific situations in their lives right now?
- Could this topic raise any challenging questions or strong opinions?

Next, take a look at your small group questions for the week and ask yourself a few questions **about what you'll be discussing**, like . . .

- Will these small group questions make sense to them?
- How might my kids answer these questions?
- Will they feel comfortable answering them honestly?
- Do I need to rephrase any of these questions for my group?
- Are there any activities I should change that would work better for my group?
- Is there at least one activity to get my movers moving?!

See? It's simple, but it's so important!

There's probably one piece of information in your lesson that stands out among the rest. It might be called a Bottom Line. Make sure you've got that sentence down pat because, especially in preschool groups, you're going to be reciting that all. morning. long. Over and over and over and over.

When you have a weekly imaginary conversation with yourself, you'll be able to better . . . clarify your thoughts.

refine your words.
anticipate their responses.
lead the conversation.

Remember, if you want this week's small group conversation to matter more, you want to think about how the conversation will go before the conversation begins.

Prepare for your small group conversation.

REHEARSE WHAT YOU'LL SAY.

If you want to prepare for your small group conversation, PACK a survival kit.

No, we don't mean bandages and disinfectant (although, with kids, that's actually not a bad idea).

We mean the kind of supplies that will help you rescue your small group conversation in the event of emergencies like . . .

out of control extroverts.
awkward silences.
irrelevant rabbit trails.
general chaos.



We'll talk about how to use these supplies later in this book. **Just look for this symbol.** For now, just trust us. You'll need:

- A confetti popper
- A stack of icebreaker questions
- A noise maker
- A stress ball
- A zipper lock bag
- A deck of cards
- Candy
- Pens
- Paper

There might be other items that come to mind when it comes to your small group and what works for them. Great! Add those items to your survival kit and bring them with you (or leave them in your small group room) just in case you need a little bit of help.

Remember, if you want this week's small group conversation to matter more, you want to be ready for anything. **Prepare for your small group conversation. PACK A SURVIVAL KIT.**

If you want to prepare for your small group conversation, PRAY for your few.

If you're anything like us, praying for your small group is, unfortunately, sometimes more of an afterthought than a vital part of your weekly preparation. Some weeks, you may only manage a hurried, well-intentioned plea to God on the way to small group. Other weeks, the only time you might pray for your few is *during* your small group.

But no matter how many times you've prayed for your few in the last week, month, or year, we've discovered there are at least two reasons why praying for your small group should be an every-week kind of thing.

Pray for your few because they need it. Do you remember what it was like for you to be a kid? It's hard. Like, really hard. Preschoolers don't have a lot of control in their young lives, which is why—as I'm sure you know—they thrive on predictable routine. Interrupting a routine they rely on can be very overwhelming to them. Elementary kids are being introduced to new social situations constantly. Besides school, sports, siblings, competitions, parents, gossip, and everything else your few are dealing with, every kid is also wrestling with big questions about who they are, why they matter, what they believe, and who they'll become. But we want to create a safe place where those big questions are encouraged. We want every kid

to grow up in a healthy environment so they can discover who they are. So as you prepare for your small group conversation each week, don't forget to pray for your few. They need it.

But there's another reason you should pray for your few.

Pray for your few because you need it. When you pray for someone else, it's usually because you want God to do something for them. But what if, when God told us to pray for each other (which He did quite often), He had a second purpose in mind? What if He designed prayer in such a way that praying for someone else didn't just result in change for them? What if it changes *us*, too?

When we pray for someone else, we learn to . . .
consider their needs.
imagine their world.
feel their emotions.
understand their perspective.

In other words, **when you pray for the kids you lead, you develop more compassion for them.** And as an SGL, you'll need that compassion when . . .
the conversation bombs.
the activity is a fail.
they ask a tough question.
they hurt someone's feelings.

As you prepare for your small group this week, don't let prayer be an afterthought. Make it a habit. Remember, if you want this week's small group conversation to matter more, you want to have a conversation with God *before* you have a conversation with your few. **Prepare for your small group conversation. PRAY FOR YOUR FEW.**

So there you have it. Four ways to prepare for your small group conversation every week. We said it would be simple, right?

Read your email.
Rehearse what you'll say.
Pack an emergency kit.
Pray for your few.

And now that you're (mostly) prepared for your small group conversation, let's talk about how to lead that conversation.

QUIZ

Do you usually know what your conversation is going to be about before you arrive?



Speaking of arriving, do you usually show up on time—or, better yet, a little bit early? (In other words, do you get there in time for donuts with chocolate sprinkles or have to settle with plain?)



author bios

Author bios



AFTON PHILLIPS

Afton Phillips is the Director of Small Group Strategies at Orange—which basically means she has been thinking about small groups, small group leaders, and small group strategies every single day since 2012. Before that, she spent three years working in children’s ministry at Browns Bridge Church and graduated from Johnson University with a degree in Children’s Ministry. But most importantly, Afton leads a small group of 3rd graders every Sunday. If you want to be Afton’s best friend, all you need to do is buy her coffee and let her wear a tiara all day.

**ADAM DUCKWORTH**

Adam Duckworth is the Lead Communicator at Downtown Harbor Church in Fort Lauderdale, FL. He transitioned to this role after spending nearly 15 years in family ministry. He is also one of the authors of “Not Normal” and “Leading Not Normal Volunteers” alongside Sue Miller. Additionally, he is the Owner of Travelmation, LLC, which is an Authorized Disney Vacation Planner which exists to help families make magical memories. His favorite attraction is the Country Bear Jamboree.



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LEADING A CONVERSATION WITH A SMALL GROUP OF KIDS ISN'T ALWAYS EASY

Sometimes they talk too much—way too much.

Sometimes they don't talk enough.

And sometimes you're pretty sure your volunteer training didn't quite prepare you for the sort of things they'd like to talk about.

Actually, if you've been a small group leader for at least five minutes, you probably already know what it's like for a small group conversation to totally bomb.

So if you've ever looked at your small group of kids and wished you knew what to say, what not to say, when to speak, when to listen, how to make them talk, how to make them stop talking then this book is for you.

The Art of Group Talk helps small group leaders like you have better conversations with kids. Because, as a small group leader, you lead a conversation with kids every single week. Conversations about their lives, their dreams, their friends, their imaginary friends, and their definitely-not friends.

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This is a book to remind you that your small group conversations—even the ones that don't go exactly as planned—**really matter.**

But there are a few ways to make your conversations **matter even more.**

With personal insight and practical advice, Afton Phillips and Adam Duckworth will help you discover helpful tips and strategies for surviving leading conversations with your small group of kids.



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