

## **Four Group Activities for Students Who May Dread Holiday Time Away From School**

### ***Guidelines and Activities For Leading a Group Coming Into the Holidays***

These activities could work for groups up to about 10 students. Make them your own – these are just suggestions you can adapt for your age group. Read through each ahead of time so you have any materials you need.

#### **Week One:**

**Give ground rules:** Establish guidelines for listening to one another, keeping confidentiality for one another about what is said in group, etc.

**Check-in:** Kids give names and one thing or one person they like at school. Invite them to elaborate for around a minute each for their introduction.

#### **Activities:**

- Have kids brainstorm a list of the things that make other people trustworthy. You'll get good insight about which students speak of people from home vs. those who only talk about people at school. **Reinforce** that we want to be trustworthy to one another in the group, but also that people who are trustworthy are people we can depend on when times are tough.
- Brainstorm a second list – the list of challenges kids their age face. (Don't ask them to reveal their own fears, even though that is what they'll usually be telling you... it is safer for kids to feel like they're speaking for others.)
- Once you have that list generated, you might ask kids how many of them know someone who might face each of those kinds of challenges, again not asking them to reveal whether it is themselves, but just acknowledging that they know someone who might struggle with that challenge. Not to name names, just a show of hands.
- Next, put a line beside those challenges, and ask kids to come up with ideas for how kids might cope with that kind of challenge. Write a word or two that represents what kids identify, and add your own suggestions.
- Reinforce that they came up with lots of good ideas
- Closure – ask each student to share one thing they learned in group this week and then go around the circle again and ask for one thing to which they look forward in the coming week.
- End with your own statement of looking forward to seeing them again next week.
- Keep the lists for reference for future groups.

## Week Two:

**Remind them of the ground rules.**

**Check-in:** Is there one thing you thought about since we saw each other last that came to mind because of group last week?

**Activity:**

- Have kids draw a picture of something that represents their safe place. Don't suggest home vs. school, just see what they reveal without direction about that. It will give you helpful information.
- Go around the circle with each student using their picture and telling one another about what they drew
- Help students make a list of those themes that are common about what makes a safe place.
- Have students come up with ideas about how they might create safe places for themselves in different environments... how can we do that at school? How can we do that at home?

**Closure and Ending:** Same as last week plus letting them know there are only two more group gatherings.

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## Week Three:

**Ground rules:** Review if needed.

**Check-in:** One thing I looked forward to in coming to group today.

**Activity:**

- Generate a list of the kinds of feelings kids have when they have school vacations and are away from their friends. This is a more positive frame than "when you're away from the stabilizing influence of being at school," but gives you the same kind of information.
- How many of you students know someone who might have these kinds of feelings or struggles?
- What are some ideas you have for how kids can cope with these feelings?
- Add your own suggestions.
- How can you be support to one another both at school and at home as the holidays approach?
- Add your suggestions.

**Closure and Ending:** The same as above, plus remind them that there is just one more group gathering.

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## Week Four:

**Check-in:** One thing I realize I've learned from being in this group.

### Activities:

- If students have enough trust, ask each student to identify one challenge they face with the holidays, ideas they have for how they will cope, and then ask all others in the group to help generate additional suggestions.
- If students don't have that level of trust, keep it general. "Of the lists of challenges we have generated so far, let's have each of you choose one you think is important, and we'll whittle the list down to those the group thinks are most important. After you have that shorter list, have the whole group generate ideas for coping with each of those challenges listed.
- Take time to let kids know about any hotlines, places they can call if things get difficult. These should include those students who are concerned about mental health issues (suffer from depression, etc.) as well as those who need a sense of safety (who can you call if people are fighting or angry in a way that makes you feel really unsafe). Encourage them to think about who they have as extended family they could call... help establish whatever you can as a safety net. In one district, the school actually paid one of the counselors over the holidays to carry a pager so he could return calls to those kids who really needed emotional support or safety. If a district chose to do that, perhaps one counselor who was willing could be paid to receive those calls for all schools in the district.
- Have some fun time that includes students making something that they give one another to keep in their pockets over the holidays to remind them of the support of group. Each student makes one, and then they all go into a basket and you pass them out, making sure that no student gets the one s/he made. This keeps kids from wanting "favorites" and instead is just a genuine reminder of the group.
- It is wonderful if you also have something to give each one that is tangible that they can keep. It can be a bead on a little leather thong, it could be a rock that you drew or wrote on with a Sharpie, or any other tangible item that can remind them of your caring for them.

### Closure:

- If students would be able to do so, give each student a moment to tell each group participant one thing they appreciate about him/her.
- Alternative: Give each student the opportunity to express what they appreciate about having been in group.
- Maybe a little treat this time...
- Send them off with your endearing words and encouragement.