**Problem-Solving Skills Activities**

**“Under the Spell of Leadership”**

from CASAA Newsletter, Dave Conlon, Publisher

Time: 15 minutes

Materials: Open space or gym

Masking tape (to make 2 long lines about 12 feet long, and 2 shorter lines about 5 feet long)

Several packs of alphabet flash cards/index cards with letter of alphabet on each (make sure you have duplicates of vowels)

Description: Divide the group into two equal teams. Have each team stand behind a starting line (tape on floor), which are placed about 15 feet apart. Between these two lines, place two additional lines of tape on the floor, about five feet long. Place a pack of alphabet flash cards/index cards on the floor in front of each of the center tape lines in front of the group. Give the following instructions to the teams…

* The challenge for the teams is to correctly spell the word this is called out using the alphabet cards that are in front of them.
* Only as many people as there are letters in the word may cross the start line for each team.
* The word must be correctly spelled, letters facing the same direction with each team member’s toes on the tape line.
* The team correctly spelling the word first wins a point.
* There is a two minute team meeting between words to allow planning strategy.

Suggested words to use:

Meetings Goal Setting (they must use a blank card in-between)

President Teamwork

Evaluation Leadership

Integrity Communication

Discussion Prompts:

1. What groups were most effective at problem solving? Why?
2. Did any groups change strategies drastically during the activity?
3. Did any groups “borrow” another group’s ideas to get the job done?

**Problem-Solving Skills Activities**

**“Tower of Air”**

from Tom Jackson, [www.activelearning.org](http://www.activelearning.org)

Time: 15-20 minutes (you may need to not use all of the discussion prompts)

Materials: 10 Balloons for each team of 3 people

Masking tape (in 3 foot long strips)

Yard stick

Description: Divide your group into teams of three. Give each team 10 balloons and a strip of making tape. Explain that the object of this challenge is to build the tallest free standing tower using bust the balloons and the masking tape that they have been given. The tower must be built on the floor (or table) and may not use any other objects to lean against or help support it. They will have 10 minutes to build their tower.

Discussion Prompts (in 3 areas):

What happened?

1. How tall did your tower end up being?
2. Did you do any planning before you started building?
3. Did the plan change after you started building? How?
4. Did everyone provide input to the plan?
5. What happened in your group as time was running out?
6. Was your end product satisfactory? What would you change next time?

What does it mean?

1. Did you look at what other teams were doing to get ideas? (Mention that this would not be cheating. You did not tell them they couldn’t look. It is a good practice to use good ideas no matter where they come from.)
2. What can this activity tell use about working together?
3. What problems can occur when you work in groups?
4. Was a leader chosen in your group? Did one emerge? Who? Why?
5. Describe the roles that each person in your group played. Were some people more involved than others? Why?

Now what can we do with this information?

1. How does working together help us to solve problems?
2. What behaviors should you exhibit when working as part of a team?
3. How important is communication with your team members?

Variations: While the activity is underway, call out certain instructions that must be followed. For example, “For the next 60 seconds no one is your group may “talk” or “For the next 60 seconds everyone in the group may only use one hand.”

**Problem-Solving Skills Activities**

**“Pile On”**

from Team-Building Activities for Every Group by Alanna Jones, 1999.

Objective: To build trust and team cohesion by asking everyone to work together on a challenging task.

Group size: 6-20 is ideal

Materials: Any flat surface with edges that people can stand on (i.e. a large stump, desk, surfboard, piece of plywood, old shirt, or bench) or a roll of masking tape

Description: Find a surface that is flat with edges that people can stand on, or make an area on the ground marked off with masking tape. The area should be big enough that everyone can fit in it, but small enough that not everyone’s feet can easily stand in the area. Challenge the group to fit everyone onto the area without anyone touching the outside area or falling off and to stay on for at least ten seconds.

Discussion Prompts:

1. How did your group decide what needed to be done during this activity?
2. Did each person do his/her own thing, or was everyone working with one another? Why?
3. What happens on a team when everyone is doing his/her own thing?
4. What happens on a team when everyone is contributing to the problem-solving process?

**Problem-Solving Skills Activities**

**“Group Walk”**

from Team-Building Activities for Every Group by Alanna Jones, 1999.

Objective: For a group to build trust and cooperation.

Group size: 2 or more

Materials: Bandanas, strips of cloth, masking tape, or an entire group who is wearing shoes with shoe laces

Description: Ask group members to stand side by side. Give the group bandanas, strips of cloth, or masking tape and ask them to tie (or tape) themselves together at the ankles (one person is ties at the ankle of his/her neighbor on the left and right, and so on down the line). If you don’t have any ties to use, people may tie their shoelaces together with both their neighbors.

Once the group is attached, ask them to work together to walk forward without falling. If this is difficult for the group to do, break them into pairs and ask them to try walking with just one other person. Once successful with this, add another pair, so that there are four people in a group and try again until successful. Keep adding people until the group can all walk together without falling. If the group is very large, it is best to break them into smaller teams of no more than ten people each.

Discussion Prompts:

1. How did you feel about your teammates during this activity?
2. Did you help each other or hinder each other during this activity?
3. What did everyone have to do during this activity to help the team be successful?
4. What happened (or what would have happened) if one person did not cooperate?
5. When in your life are you on a team that is dependent on you for its success?

**Problem-Solving Skills Activities**

**“Flip”**

from Team-Building Activities for Every Group by Alanna Jones, 1999.

Objective: For everyone on a team to do his/her part when solving a problem.

Group size: 10 or more

Materials: One or more large tarp, old sheet, or old blanket

Description: Find a tarp (or old sheet or blanket) that is large enough for the whole group to stand on while leaving about a quarter of it empty. (If the group is large, break into smaller teams.) Once the group is standing on top of the tarp, challenge them to completely flip it over so that everyone is standing on the other side of the tarp. At no time may anyone get off of the tarp or touch the ground during this activity!

Discussion Prompts:

1. Did anyone get in your way during this activity?
2. How did you come up with a plan with such a large group?
3. Did anyone emerge as a leader? Who and what did they do?
4. Do all problem solving activities need a leader? Why or why not?
5. Do you feel like more or less a part of the group after doing this activity? Why?

**Problem-Solving Skills Activities**

**“Group Limbo”**

from Team-Building Activities for Every Group by Alanna Jones, 1999.

Objective: For team members to help one another when faced with a challenging task.

Group size: 4-12 is ideal

Materials: Limbo stick, or string and chairs

Description: Have two people hold the limbo stick two feet off the ground, or tie string between two chairs at this height. The challenge is for the entire group to move under the stick from one side to the other without anyone touching or bumping the stick. There are some rules that must be followed for this team-building activity.

1. The only part of your body that may touch the ground is your feet.
2. Once you move under the stick you may not return to the other side unless you successfully move back under the stick.
3. You don’t have to go under the stick limbo-style, but you must never touch the stick.
4. If anyone touches the ground with any body part besides his/her feet, the whole team must start over. (You may be flexible on this rule if you choose.)
5. You may help each other!

Once the team is successful at this height, challenge them to go lower!

Discussion Prompts:

1. Could you have gone under the stick without help from your teammates?
2. How did you come up with a plan?
3. How did you feel if you needed more help than others getting under the stick?
4. Is it okay for some people on a team to do more work than others?
5. Are you usually needing more help than others on your team or are you helping others more?

**Problem-Solving Skills Activities**

**“Tall Tower”**

from Team-Building Activities for Every Group by Alanna Jones, 1999.

Objective: For everyone on a team to contribute to the completion of a challenging task.

Group size: 2 or more

Materials: varied (see idea list below)

Description: Prior to the activity, gather supplies together that can be used to make a tall tower but are not conventional things to build with, such as…

Paper (and nothing else)

Raw spaghetti and marshmallows

Gumdrops and toothpicks

Drinking straws and paper clips

Drinking straws and tape

Paper cups and a pack of chewing gum

String, paper cups, and drinking straws

Cookies

Break the group into teams of two to six members each. Give each group a pile of the supplies you have gathered and challenge them to build the tallest tower they can using only the supplies given to them. Give the group a time limit. At the end of the allotted time, ask the groups to show their creative to the rest of the group.

Discussion Prompts:

1. How did you start this project?
2. Was getting started harder or easier than actually building the structure?
3. Did you have a plan or did everyone just start building? Was your group successful with the strategy that you chose?
4. Did anyone in your group emerge as a leader? If so, how did you feel about this? If not, do you wish someone had?
5. Could one person have done this project alone? What was the benefit of doing it as part of a team?

Variation: Everyone can only use one hand when building the structure.

Challenge the group to gather up anything they can find and to build a tall tower with these object.

**Problem-Solving Skills Activities**

**“Read the Clues, Discover the Problem”**

Developed from activity in Problem Solving for Teens by Barbara J. Gray, 1990.

It is important to clearly define a problem you are having before you attempt to solve it. Defining the problem includes what is said and done. Often non-verbal communication can give you better insights into the problem than words.

Objective: Encourage students to read non-verbal clues in order to define a current problem

Materials: Note cards, pen/pencil

Description: Write down common teen problems, one problem per note card. In this activity students will play the game of charades. Have a student come to the front of the room, pick a note card and then silently role-play the problem situation on the card. The student actors should try to use very detailed facial expressions and body language to convey the problem on their card. The audience guesses until the correct problem is guessed. After each problem is acted out and guessed correctly, answer the questions below.

Discussion Prompts:

1. What were the clues that led you to define this problem?
2. Has anyone had this problem before?
3. Based on the clues, what are some of the alternatives for solving this problem?

**Problem-Solving Skills Activities**

**“Paper Tower”**

from 104 Activities that Build Self-Esteem, Teamwork, Communication, Anger Management, Self-Discovery and Coping Skills by Alanna Jones, 1998.

It seems that most everyone likes a good challenge. This is why there are so many competitive games, extreme sports and contests to be won in our world. Sometimes we meet the challenge and find that it isn’t enough: we aren’t satisfied. We want to go higher, be better or move onto something bigger.

Challenges are for individuals as well as for groups. This activity is one challenge that is easy but hard at the same time. Everyone can be involved in the activity and people don’t seem to want to quit. Each team wants to keep building the tower taller and higher that they had built it before even it if means starting over many times. The challenge in this game is what brings people together to work as a team.

Objective: To work as a part of a team and to problem solve as a team. To continue an activity even it frustration occurs.

Group size: 2 – 10 participants

Materials: Stack of 8x11 copy paper

(this is a great time to use up old scrap paper!)

Description: Simply give the group a stack of paper and nothing else. Instruct the group that they must build the tallest tower that they possibly can, using only the paper given to them. No tape, gum, paper clips, etc. allowed. (Sometimes I limit the group to 15 sheets of paper; other time I give them whatever I can round up.)

There are many different ways this activity can be done, but I find people work even harder at it if I give them a goal (i.e. “I’ve seen a tower five sheets high (the long way) before”). When I say this, everyone wants to get at least five and hopefully more. The goal must be challenging but also realistic for the group to reach. Or have more than one group attempting to get the tallest tower.

Hint: There are many ways to build a paper tower, but one of the better ways is to fold each piece into three sections then open up the paper slightly and stack them on top of each other or place a horizontal sheet between each stacked paper.

Discussion Prompts:

1. What steps did the group take in order to solve this problem?
2. Did everyone contribute? Is so, how? If not, why?
3. Did anyone in the group get frustrated at any point? If so, how was it handled?
4. What things did the group do to show teamwork?
5. As a member of the team, what role did you take on in this activity?
6. When in your life is it important to use teamwork?

**Problem-Solving Skills Activities**

**“Freeze”**

from 104 Activities that Build Self-Esteem, Teamwork, Communication, Anger Management, Self-Discovery and Coping Skills by Alanna Jones, 1998.

Being in front of a group of people and adapting quickly to a new situation takes quick thinking and the willingness to take a risk. Adapting to something different and out of the ordinary is very difficult for some people and can be a frightening experience. However, in order for someone to change the things that are happening in his or her own life, that person must take big risk and be able to adapt to new situations.

Objective: To learn about the importance of being able to adapt to a new situation, to be flexible and change if needed, and to be able to interact with others. To look at how different people like to be the center of attention while some shy away from it. To explore the art of drama as a interest to be pursued to increase self-esteem.

Group size: 5 or more

Materials: none

Description: This is a fun drama game that gets people to take risks and change a situation. Start with two people who stand up and are in front of the group on the “stage.” The rest of the group is watching and in the “audience.”

Give the two people in the front a scene, location or situation that they must act out. For example you may tell them they are fishing at a lake, and they must in their own way create this scene, act it out, dialog and do whatever they want with it. While they are acting it out they may change positions (i.e. they both are fishing, then they are both trying to reel in a really big fish together).

While the scene is being acted out the audience members should be looking for an opportunity to become involved in the drama by raising their hand and yelling “freeze” at anytime when they see a place that they want the scene to freeze. At this point, the two people on the “stage” need to stop acting and pose in the position that they are in when they hear “freeze.” For example if the two were reeling in a big fish together, they must be frozen in that position. The person who yells freeze then chooses whose place s/he wants to take and puts him/herself in that place and resumes the scene. S/he must then change the scene with dialog, and the other person must follow his/her lead to create a new scene that is then acted out. So, two people reeling in a fish may suddenly become two firemen with a big hose, a team playing tug-o-war, or two cowboys trying to rope a cow together. The scene goes on until the next person yells “freeze” and changes it.

Note: For younger kids it is sometimes a good idea to make them wait for ten seconds before yelling freeze because they are all so eager to get in on the action.

Discussion Prompts:

1. In this game, was it hard or easy for you to adapt to the different situations you were in?
2. D you ever have trouble adapting to a situation?
3. Why is it important to be able to change or adapt to a situation?
4. Did some people go up on the “stage” more than others did? Why?
5. Do you shy away from being the center of attention or do you like it? Why?
6. What did you learn about yourself as a result of this activity?
7. Does anyone have an interest in drama after doing this activity?

**Problem-Solving Skills Activities**

**“Build It!”**

from Team-Building Activities for Every Group by Alanna Jones, 1999.

Objective: To build a structure as a group without touching anyone else’s building materials.

Group size: 2 or more

Materials: Building blocks (or other building materials)

Description: Prior to this activity, the leader builds a structure out of some blocks and makes a pile of the exact same blocks for the group to use. Show the group the pile and structure and then ask group members to each select one or more of the blocks for themselves until there are no remaining blocks.

Now the group must try to build the structure exactly like the original. Each person may only touch his/her own block/s and none of the other blocks. If at anytime someone touches a block that does not belong to him/her the group must start over.

Discussion Prompts:

1. How did the group decide how to divide up the pile of blocks?
2. Was this an easy task for the group or difficult? Why?
3. What would have happened differently if everyone could have touched all of the blocks? Would this task have been easier or harder?
4. Did you have to use patience during this activity? Was this hard or easy for you?
5. When in life do you need to use patience when working with a group of people? Why?

**Problem-Solving Skills Activities**

**“Reversal”**

from Team-Building Activities for Every Group by Alanna Jones, 1999.

Objective: For a group of people to work as a team when presented with a challenge.

Group size: 4 – 16

Materials: Large log or something similar to stand on

Description: For this activity you will need to find an object that is narrow but something the entire group can stand on. Some ideas are: log, bench, bleacher, parking lot curb, folded towels, or a line of masking tape.

Ask the entire group to stand on this object and instruct them to completely switch the group around so that everyone is standing in the same order, only now on the other end. If at anytime during this challenge anyone falls off of the object or steps out of bounds, the entire group must start over.

Another way to play is to divide the group into two teams (boys and girls is easiest). The two teams must switch places on the log without anyone falling off.

Discussion Prompts:

1. Did everyone in the group have to help out in order for the team to be successful at this task? What if someone chose not to help?
2. How did you feel about the close body contact that was needed for this activity? Did it make you more or less comfortable with this group and why?
3. Was trust involved in this activity? Why or why not?

**Problem-Solving Skills Activities**

**“Group Draw”**

from Team-Building Activities for Every Group by Alanna Jones, 1999.

Objective: To work together as a group to create an original drawing.

Group size: 4 or more

Materials: Colored markers, paper

Description: Give each person a different colored marker (or for added teamwork, allow the group to decide who gets what color). Give one person a piece of paper and ask him/her to make a squiggle or line on the paper and to then pass it to the person next to them. That person may turn the paper in any direction and add another line or squiggle. The lines must not intersect. The group should try to create a picture of something.

Once everyone has had a turn, ask the group to come up with a title for their picture. If you have a large group broken into smaller teams, hold an art exhibit at the end, allowing each team to share their picture with the rest of the group and to explain its title.

Discussion Prompts:

1. Hoe did you work together as a group to complete the picture?
2. Is everyone in the group happy with the picture that was created? Why or why not?
3. Was it harder to make the picture or to come up with a title? Why?
4. Is it easier to do things by yourself or with others?
5. Why is it important to be able to work with others?

Variation: Ask the group to work together to draw a picture, but instead of passing the paper around, they all work at the same time. All of the colors must be used, but each person may only use his/her color—no trading or sharing is allowed!

**Problem-Solving Skills Activities**

**“Foothold”**

from Team-Building Activities for Every Group by Alanna Jones, 1999.

Objective: For the group to learn to work together as a team.

Group size: 4 or more

Materials: none

Description: Break a large group into smaller teams of four to eight members. Each team must stand in a circle and select one person to be in the middle. The person in the middle can keep both feet on the ground, but everyone else may only keep one foot on the ground and the person n the middle must somehow hold or carry each group member’s remaining foot (or leg). The challenge for the group is to move as a unit in one direction without the person in the middle dropping anyone’s foot or leg in the process.

Discussion Prompts:

1. Did one person have to work harder than the rest of your team for your group to be successful? Why?
2. How do you feel when you have to do more work than others who are on your team? Why?
3. How do you feel when others have to do more work when on your team in order to make up for you?
4. Is it OK for different people to work harder or less hard when on a team? Why or why not?
5. What are some teams that you can contribute more to than others in the same group?

**Problem-Solving Skills Activities**

**“Piggyback Challenge”**

from Team-Building Activities for Every Group by Alanna Jones, 1999.

Objective: To build trust and communication skills.

Group size: 2 or more

Materials: none

Description: Ask the group to get into pairs and for half the pairs to stand on one half of the room and for the rest to stand facing them on the other half. Each pair needs to select one person to ride piggyback on the back of his/her partner. The person who is carrying the other person closes his/her eyes. On the signal “go,” the person on the back must verbally tell his/her partner how to safely get to the other side of the room without bumping into anyone who is coming in the other direction or who is on either side of them.

To make this activity more challenging, you may place some other obstacles in the area that must be maneuvered around.

Discussion Prompts:

1. If you were the one with your eyes closed, did you ever open them? Why or why not?
2. Did you trust your partner who was giving directions?
3. If you were the one being carried, did you trust your partner?
4. Why is trust important when working as part of a team?
5. Are you trustworthy? Why or why not?