

**TEAM-BUILDING EXERCISES  
FOR TEENS**

## **THE PARTY**

### **TARGET CONCEPTS:**

Recognizing individual strengths of group members, understanding others, and group warm-up.

### **DESCRIPTION:**

Teens write their strengths on small slips of paper, put them into balloons, and blow up the balloons. One by one the balloons are popped to reveal what each person brings to the party. As the group learns about the unique talents each person has to offer, the information is transferred onto a large white banner so people can see all of their strengths together.

The Party is a fun, low-risk icebreaker that helps set the tone for positive team dynamics. It's also a good activity to use if a group has been working together for some time and needs a refresher on what people can contribute and how the group can work well together. The simplicity of this activity allows it to be used with a wide range of ages, from older to younger teens, and it's fun for teen mentors to use when working with younger groups.

### **GOALS:**

1. To identify how a new or existing team can work together.
2. To learn how individual members view themselves as part of the group.
3. To learn how to recognize strengths in order to get the most from every member of the group.

### **MATERIALS:**

1. Large banner paper.
2. Markers.
3. Masking tape.
4. Medium-sized balloons, several per person.
5. Pens for each person.
6. Several slips of paper.
7. toothpicks for popping balloons.

### **PREPARATION:**

On the banner paper, draw several balloons. Hang the banner on the wall in a location where it can be seen by all. Clear an area in the room where the group can sit in a circle with a space in the middle for a pile of balloons.

### **ACTIVITY:**

Have teens sit in a circle. Pass out pens, paper, and balloons to each person. Set up a scenario, something like this:

"You've all been invited to a party. It's like pot-luck, but instead of bringing food to share, you're bringing yourself and the strengths you believe you contribute to this group. For example, you may be a creative thinker, or very organized, or able to keep others

motivated. On the slips of paper, write down the strengths or talents that you bring to the party. Once you've written these down, carefully put them into your balloons, blow them up, tie them off, and put them in the circle."

Allow 5-10 minutes for the teens to complete this activity. When everyone is done, designate one person to pick a balloon from the pile, pop it, and read the slip(s) inside. After a slip has been read, ask the author to step forward, share a little more, and then write his name and strength in a balloon on the banner paper. This person becomes the next to pop a balloon from the pile.

### DISCUSSION:

Discuss how the group can use the information they've gained from hearing everyone share their strengths. Consider discussion questions such as:

1. How can what you've learned from others be used in the future to improve the way this group works together?
2. Are there any people who you think overlooked one of their strengths? Who? What is the strength?
3. How can you make the most of the strengths and talents of group members and still allow everyone a chance to try new things or use new talents?
4. Imagine the group was going to assign official jobs for each member. Based on the strengths people shared, what roles do you think people should have?
5. Is the group missing any strengths? What are they and how can you build them? What if you can't? How can you overcome not having certain strengths or prevent the lack of them from becoming a group weakness?

### WRAP-UP:

If possible, keep the banner hanging in the room for further meetings. It can remind members of everyone's strengths and guide them when trying to determine who is the best person for a team task. If space doesn't allow, have a teen volunteer to type a summary sheet of the strengths people bring to the party and give everybody copies to keep in their journals or notebooks.

## **TALENT CHAIRS**

### **TARGET CONCEPTS:**

Recognizing individual strengths of group members, understanding others, and group dynamics.

### **DESCRIPTION:**

In a fashion similar to 'Musical Chairs,' teens discover talents and qualities of others. The leader, who doesn't have a chair, calls out a quality using a formatted statement. All participants who possess this quality must get up from their chairs and find a different chair to sit in. The leader will find a chair to sit in during this exchange. Instead of losing their place in the group, the person who doesn't get a chair becomes the next group leader and determines the next quality to be discovered.

This simple exercise is a fun way to discover each other without putting anybody on the spot. With an open time frame, it can be used as a short activity or it can be used as a lead-in to a more in-depth discovery exercise.

### **GOALS:**

1. To discover each other's strengths and qualities.
2. To identify similarities and differences among group members.
3. To foster inclusiveness through discovery of individual strengths and those of the team as a whole.

### **MATERIALS:**

1. Chairs for each participant.
2. A list of starter questions.

### **PREPARATION:**

Clear the room and place enough chairs in a large circle for all the participants, less one chair. Determine who will be the first leader.

Explain the exercise and its goals to the participants. Read some sample statements (refer to the end of this exercise description) to give some seed for thought. Encourage creativity and finding qualities that are unknown as to whether they apply to anybody in the group.

### **BACKGROUND**

At first, teens may choose qualities that they are aware of in those they are close to. As the exercise proceeds, if it becomes evident that certain members have not left their chairs, the leader may attempt to find a quality that a 'left out' member has so they can change chairs as well. They will see that the exercise is more fun when there is more activity. As a coach, you can help foster this compassion for others if, after a period of time, it has not been discovered by the group.

Some of the qualities searched for can be open to interpretation, allowing the seated participants to determine whether they fit in that group or not. Do not discourage this.

### ACTIVITY:

Have the first leader stand in the center of the circle while all the others are in the chairs. The leader begins a statement by saying "Stand up and find another chair if you...." and finishes the statement with an attribute that may apply to the other participants.

Everybody who possesses that attribute will stand and find another chair that is not immediately next to them, unless that is the only other chair available. The leader claims one of the empty chairs and one person will be left standing. This person is the new leader and repeats the process.

### DISCUSSION:

Discuss the discovery process and how the group can use the information they've gained about themselves. Use questions such as:

1. What were some surprises you found out about others?
2. Were you surprised by the ways in which you were similar to some other people in the group? Explain.
3. How can you use what you've learned about each other in future group activities?
4. When you were the leader, did you find yourself trying to find attributes to include certain people in the circle? Did you try to find attributes to exclude certain people in the circle? Why was that?
5. When you were not the leader, were you looking for ways to be included in the group that had to find a new chair? Why? Did you try to find ways not to be included in that group? Why?

### WRAP-UP:

Ask teens to reflect on the different ways they can learn about others and benefit from the strengths of others through teamwork. Encourage them to write in their journals about the discovery process and how they felt about other group members both before and after this exercise.

### SAMPLE STATEMENTS:

1. Stand up and find another chair if you have red hair.
2. Stand up and find another chair if you are wearing white socks.
3. Stand up and find another chair if you've been to another country.
4. Stand up and find another chair if your grandparents live in this state.
5. Stand up and find another chair if you have more than three pets.
6. Stand up and find another chair if you like to wear shorts.

## **TREASURE HUNT**

### **TARGET CONCEPTS:**

Qualities of leadership, communication skills, teamwork and group dynamics, and getting to know others.

### **DESCRIPTION:**

Different from a scavenger hunt, this activity has teens working with one another to uncover certain clues about their team. As you ask a series of questions, teens share information about themselves and find out more about others, earning points for their responses. The activity is a good icebreaker and also can be used later on to reconnect participants with members of their group.

### **GOALS:**

1. To share one's abilities and skills with others.
2. To gain awareness of what others bring to the group.
3. To work together to achieve a goal through communication and low-risk self-disclosure.

### **MATERIALS:**

1. "Treasure Hunt Questions" handout.
2. "Treasure Hunt Score Sheet", one copy for each team.
3. Pen or pencil for each team.

### **PREPARATION:**

Read the "Treasure Hunt Questions" and modify or add questions as needed, but use about 15 questions. Design a "Treasure Hunt Score Sheet" make a copy for each team. Determine how the teens will be broken up into groups. It is best to have all teams of the same size, and around four or five members each.

### **ACTIVITY:**

Divide the group into teams of four or five and pass out a score sheet and pencil to each team. Ask teams to identify a scorekeeper who will be responsible for tallying the points throughout the activity.

Each team will go on a 'Treasure Hunt' for particular qualities in people on their team. Explain that the facilitator will read a series of questions and that for each question, the team earns one point for each member who fits what the question asks. Encourage them to be honest in answering each question. The scorekeeper needs to tally the score for each question and then tally the overall score for all of them.

Work through each question slowly. Give the teams time to talk about the question because they'll discover new things about the questions and new things about the others on their team. Move on only when you think all teams have tallied their scores for a given question. Plan to spend about 25-30 minutes asking the questions and allowing teams time to discuss them. When you've read all of your selected questions, ask the teams to calculate their overall score.

### DISCUSSION:

Determine and acknowledge which team that had the highest overall score. Take 10-15 minutes to discuss the activity and draw out participants' ideas about incorporating what they learned in their small teams into the cooperative workings of the large group. Allow the teams to sit together. Consider discussion questions such as:

1. What did you learn about others on your team? How diverse is your team? Were there any individuals who responded to all the same questions? Were there any questions where everyone received a point? Where your team received no points? Explain.
2. What questions caused the greatest discussion within your team? Explain.
3. Which questions was the most challenging for your team? Which was the easiest to answer? What can this group do with the information you learned from this activity?
4. What was the most interesting response in your group? Explain.
5. What questions would you add to this treasure hunt?

### SUGGESTED QUESTIONS:

1. Who is involved in a club, activity, or a sports team or works in addition to going to school?
2. Who has spent time volunteering in the community?
3. Who has spoken up for a cause or an issue even when others didn't support your opinion?
4. Who is from a different cultural background? (teams decide what 'different' means.)
5. Who currently mentors someone, has mentored others, or is being mentored by someone?
6. Who has confronted someone who has made an inappropriate comment?
7. Who can correctly name the capital of our state?
8. Who has chosen not to go along with friends even when they were pressuring you?
9. Who speaks more than one language?
10. Who has attended a teen workshop or leadership conference?
11. Who has ever been nominated or has run for a position to lead others, including for a sports team, a scout or youth group, a school club, or another organized group?
12. Who has written a letter to the editor or to a member of Congress, mayor, school principal, or another authority?
13. Who has stood up to a bully, either for yourself or on behalf of someone else?
14. Who has been involved in a leadership-specific group such as a student council, youth leader program, counselor-in-training program, political campaign team, youth mentoring team, or another group that means a lot to you?

### TREASURE HUNT SCORE SHEET:

Suggestion: Use three columns: One for the question number and a brief description of the question, a second for the points gained in that question, and a third for the running total.

## **SNOWFLAKES**

### **TARGET CONCEPTS:**

Communication skills and listening skills.

### **DESCRIPTION:**

This quick exercise highlights the importance of clear communication and active listening in order to accurately express ideas and instructions or to receive messages from others.

After hearing the same directions for creating a simple paper snowflake, teens discover that the individual results can vary considerably. Through discussion, they discover that people interpret things differently, and understanding others relies on this concept.

### **GOALS:**

1. To identify ways that messages can be misinterpreted.
2. To strengthen communication skills.
3. To recognize use of different communication and listening techniques.

### **MATERIALS:**

1. One 8.5 x 11 paper per person.

### **ACTIVITY:**

Give one sheet of paper to each person. Explain that you want them to follow the directions you are about to give without asking questions of you or their neighbors. They will work individually. Give the following directions quickly, without clarifying exactly what you mean:

1. Fold the paper in half and tear off a top corner.
2. Fold it in half again and tear off the top corner.
3. Fold it in half again and tear off the left corner.
4. Rotate the paper to the right three times and tear off the bottom corner.
5. Fold it in half again and tear off the middle piece.

Instruct the group to unfold their papers and compare their snowflakes with those around them. They will find that their snowflakes may or may not match others.

### **DISCUSSION:**

Discuss the importance of communicating clearly, as illustrated by the different ways participants interpreted the same instructions. Use questions such as:

1. Why is it that even though everyone received the same directions, not everyone had the same outcome? What would have changed if you could have asked questions?
2. Have you ever told someone one thing only to have the person hear and do something different? What happened, and how did you deal with it?

3. If you are the leader of a group, what steps can you take to make sure that others clearly understand what you're trying to tell them?
4. How can you improve your communication skills when it becomes obvious that others are seeing things differently than you intended?

WRAP-UP:

If space allows, hang the snowflakes to remind teens of the importance of communicating clearly and of the different ways messages can be received. Also suggest that teens write in their journals about the importance of clear communication, perspective, and dialogue.

## **DIAGRAMS**

### **TARGET CONCEPTS:**

Communication skills, problem-solving, teamwork, and group dynamics.

### **DESCRIPTION:**

This exercise emphasizes problem-solving via different methods of communication. Teens work in pairs, with one person guiding the other in an attempt to make a simple drawing. The pairs try to accomplish the goal in three different ways; twice with a limitation on how they communicate, and finally with as much back-and-forth conversation as necessary.

### **GOALS:**

1. To learn to work as a team using limited resources and no verbal communication.
2. To clarify challenges that can arise even with an obvious group goal in mind.
3. To strengthen nonverbal communication skills.

### **MATERIALS:**

1. Six pieces of letter-sized paper for each team.
2. Pens or pencils for each person.

### **PREPARATION:**

Clear the floor of the room.

Divide the teens into pairs and have them choose who is A and who is B.

### **ACTIVITY:**

Give each person three sheets of paper and have the pairs sit on the floor with their backs to each other. They should find a place with ample room so other teams won't interfere. The teams will work independently of each other and are to remain in this position throughout the process, each unable to see what the other is doing. Instruct partner A of each team to draw three simple line diagrams, one on each piece of paper. The drawings can be different. Give about three minutes for this activity.

In the first stage, partner B tries to correctly draw the same diagram by receiving instructions from partner A without being able to ask questions. Only partner A can speak. Partner B cannot speak or ask any questions. Allow five minutes for this stage.

In the second stage, partner B attempts to duplicate the second drawing, but this time is able to ask yes-or-no questions only. Again allow five minutes for this stage.

In the third stage, the task is repeated with the final drawing, and the partners are able to talk freely. Allow five minutes again for this stage.

After all three stages, allow the partners to look together at each other's drawings. Bring the group together in a large group for a discussion on communication and what they learned.

DISCUSSION:

Take 10-15 minutes to discuss how the teams communicated and what they learned. Use questions such as:

1. Describe what it was like to be partner A or partner B. When you're part of a different team, which person do you most frequently feel like - A or B? How does this role work for you? What would you change?
2. Each time you attempted to accomplish the task, you needed to rely on different communication skills. Explain what you dealt with as partners during each of the different attempts.
3. What happens to relationships in a group when one person has more information than others? How can members of a group deal with this type of situation?
4. Can you think of some real-life situations where you were trying to solve a problem but didn't have all the information you needed? What would have changed in that situation if you had received more information or if others had communicated more clearly with you while you tried to solve the problem?
5. What happens when one person in your group has a specific goal in mind but can't clearly communicate it to the group? How can your group improve the way information is communicated to everyone involved?

WRAP-UP:

Encourage teens to write in their journals about team communication and the obstacles, challenges, and insights they experienced or observed.

## **BUILDING MODELS**

### **TARGET CONCEPTS:**

Teamwork, group dynamics, communication skills, and achieving a stated goal.

### **DESCRIPTION:**

While reinforcing the process of teamwork to reach a common goal, this exercise utilizes discussion of communication and teamwork to learn about the importance of each person's role.

Teens are divided into groups of three who work together in two phases. First, each team designs and creates a structure without knowing they are building it for another team to duplicate. In the second phase the teams attempt to duplicate the design of another team while each member plays an assigned role.

### **GOALS:**

1. To learn to work as a team using specific resources and instructions.
2. To experience challenges that can arise even with an obvious group goal.
3. To strengthen communication and team-work skills.

### **MATERIALS:**

1. Identical bags of simple building materials such as ball-and-sticks, toothpicks and marshmallows, or Legos. Assure that each bag has the same number of each color and size. Each bag should contain 60-80 pieces. Prepare two bags per team.
2. For each team, a non-transparent box large enough to contain an individual structure.
3. Ample room for the teams to work remotely from one another.

### **PREPARATION:**

Divide the group into an even number of teams. A team size of three works best, however teams of four can be used. Attempt to divide them such that pairs of teams are of equal size. (For example, have six teams of three and two teams of four.) Do not make teams smaller than three.

Arrange the room so that teams can work remotely from each other.

Place a row of chairs (one for each team) at a front table that is large enough to hold all of the boxes.

### **BACKGROUND:**

When teams begin this project they tend to build with creativity and not malice. They don't know another team will need to duplicate their structure, and so they focus on creating a unique and interesting structure. While they usually start with an attitude of competition, teens soon discover that their success won't be measured by beating the others but will depend on their work as a group to achieve a goal. The activity is most effective when allowing these discoveries to play out naturally.

### ACTIVITY:

Give each team one bag of materials and one box. Instruct them to build any kind of structure they wish without modifying the pieces. (For example, they cannot bend or break toothpicks.) Encourage creativity. Give them five minutes to complete their structures. Remind them to keep their structures away from the view of the other teams.

After five minutes, have each team put their structure into their box. Instruct the teams to assign roles to their members as Explainer, Messenger, or Builder. If there are four members to a team, two can be Messengers. The teams must make these assignments before proceeding.

The Explainer from each team will carry their team's box to the front table and place it at one of the chairs. The Explainers are then to choose a different box to sit in front of. You can choose how to accomplish this, however they should not be able to choose based on the structure in the box. They may have to do this with their backs to the table if the boxes do not have covers.

Give each Builder another bag of materials. The Builder's job is to build a new structure identical to the model their Explainer has selected. They will do this with the information that the Messenger brings to them. The Explainer must tell the Messenger what the design looks like, including the color of the pieces. These are the rules:

1. Only the Explainer can view the model; not the Messenger or the Builder.
2. Only the Builder can touch the new structure or the raw materials.
3. Only the Messenger can speak to the Explainer or the Builder.
4. The Builder can ask the Messenger questions but cannot speak to the Explainer.
5. Messengers can keep going back and forth as much as necessary.

If there are two Messengers on a team, they must take turns going to the Explainer, and one cannot go to the Explainer until the other has completed communication with the Builder (no overlap of Messenger activities). The Messengers cannot speak to each other and once a Messenger has started communication with the Builder, the other can no longer communicate with the Builder until he/she visits the Explainer again. As an alternative, if you have two Messengers on every team, they should trade places between the Explainer and Builder simultaneously. This way, each cannot benefit from hearing the conversations of the other.

For an additional challenge, set a rule that the Messenger can't see what the Builder is building until the end. If you apply this rule, the Messenger must provide information from the Explainer without being able to point to or correct the Builder. If choosing to add this rule, state it now.

After an opportunity for questions, give the teams ten minutes to complete this phase, then have all three members from each team to get together with both structures to see how well they completed the task.

### DISCUSSION:

While every team had the same goal, it's likely that each worked very differently together. Take 10-15 minutes to discuss how the teams worked together and what they experienced and learned about communication. Use questions such as:

1. After building your structures the first time, what was your reaction when you realized what you would do next?
2. Describe what it was like to be the Explainer, the Messenger, or the Builder. Which role do you think was the most challenging? Why?
3. If this had been an exceptionally important task involving communication, about how well would your team have done? What would need to change for your team to be more effective as communicators?
4. Was there any time during this activity when you wanted to cheat, maybe by peeking at the model? Why did or didn't you do this? (Relate this to real-life situations where people are given clear instructions on what is or isn't acceptable in the process of completing a task.)
5. In what ways does this activity relate to how rumors and gossip spread? Were there times when you found yourself doubting the information being communicated to you? If it were a rumor going around, how would you have responded?

WRAP-UP:

Ask teens to observe the specific roles they play in their circle of friends or in other groups to which they belong. Remind them to look at interconnectedness and communication among people in different roles and how groups have successfully established those roles. Encourage teens to write in their journals about accomplishing group goals, communicating, and working as a team while restricted to specific rules and roles.

## **TRAVELING TEAMS**

### **TARGET CONCEPTS:**

Teamwork and group dynamics, communication skills, and building trust.

### **DESCRIPTION:**

Working as a team and building trust within that team go hand in hand. Best done in a large room or outside, this exercise requires teens to rely on others to guide them through an obstacle course. Working in teams of three, teens take turns being a blindfolded "Traveler" who is guided through the course by the other two teammates while building a story. Be aware that blindfolded participants generally find themselves outside their comfort zone.

### **GOALS:**

1. To build teamwork skills that transfer from small groups to large groups.
2. To strengthen communication skills.
3. To establish a sense of trust and recognize how to continue building trust as a group.

### **MATERIALS:**

1. Bandannas or other material to be used as blindfolds, one for each team.
2. Objects for building an obstacle course such as chairs, desks, hula hoops, balls, collapsible tunnels, yarn or string, etc.

### **PREPARATION:**

In an open area, set up a relatively easy obstacle course. Provide challenge while allowing small groups to get through the course without feeling overwhelmed or intimidated. Create areas that can be identified as the walking path, free of impediments. Allow space between obstacles. If outdoors, use a location where participation can be uninhibited and the teens won't be self-conscious that others might be watching.

### **BACKGROUND:**

Trust-building activities are important to incorporate into group experiences, whether the group has met a few times or has been together for awhile. By their nature, such exercises call on group members to accept and face personal challenges. Because this exercise involves the use of blindfolds, an experience that some teens may be uncomfortable with, you should allow teens to participate in the blindfolded portion by choice. A concept that can help you facilitate this is "Challenge by Choice."

Challenge by Choice (CbC) is an approach to facilitated learning endorsed by Project Adventure, an education and training organization known for its innovative experiential education approach. CbC encourages individuals to set activity goals that offer the right degree of personal challenge to improve skills and contribute to the group, rather than setting goals that are too easy or difficult. The level of challenge depends on the individual. An example for this activity is that a teen who is anxious about wearing a blindfold. In this case, offer to allow him/her to wear the blindfold through only half of the course, with agreement from the team that it can be removed any time after that.

Some teens may be too uncomfortable taking personal risks to engage fully in the exercise. With this in mind, explain CbC to the group and gain acceptance of CbC from all group members. When you acknowledge their hesitancy ahead of time, teens are likely to appreciate your sensitivity to their perspectives and, in turn, may be more likely to participate to a greater extent than they otherwise would. By establishing expectations and choices in this way, you set the tone for peers to be sensitive to others as well.

ACTIVITY:

Allow the entire teen group to determine the path through the obstacle course. Divide the group into teams of three and give each a blindfold. At this point, describe CbC, and tell the teams that they will determine how their members will travel the obstacle course.

Also explain that while the course is the same for everyone, each team determines what it means to them. They might imagine it's another planet or that they're going across an ocean. Or it may be more realistic, such as doing a group project. Whatever the course represents, as the guides are leading the Traveler, create a metaphor for each obstacle they must get through. (Example: A table represents an island in the ocean.)

Each team works together to get all members through the course, one at a time. The sighted members verbally guide the blindfolded Traveler safely through the obstacle course. Guides should describe the surroundings in as much detail as possible, including sounds, smells, colors, or movement.

Instruct each group to focus on their own team and not be distracted by the other groups. The course is done at walking speed, and guides are responsible for knowing where other groups are around their Traveler. Each member gets to be the Traveler, so once the team finishes guiding one person through, they switch roles and guide another member through. Each team will go through the course three times. After all members have played the Traveler, the group will discuss their learning experiences.

DISCUSSION:

Take 10-15 minutes to discuss how the small teams worked together and what they learned. Use questions such as:

1. What did the journey represent to your team? What did some of the obstacles represent?
2. Did you trust your team members before the exercise? Why or why not? Do you trust them more or less after the exercise? Explain.
3. How successful was your team in working together to get through the course? What would you change if you did it again?
4. When you were the Traveler, how well do you think your teammates communicated? When you were a guide, how well do you think you communicated? When there was a communication breakdown, what happened? How did your team deal with that?
5. What communication skills did you rely on when you were the Traveler?
6. If trust didn't exist in a team, how would you work to develop it?

WRAP-UP:

Encourage teens to write in their journals about working together as a team to move through a journey, allowing themselves to trust others, and the value and challenge of developing trust in a group.