

BEHAVIOR · GRADES 2–6

Group Work

What it looks like

Why group work goes wrong

Group work is one of the most common things primary teachers ask children to do, and one of the most poorly-taught. The result: dominant children take over, quiet children check out, falling-outs erupt, and the resulting work is mediocre. The fix is not less group work — it's better-taught group work. Roles, voice levels, expectations, and how to disagree all need to be explicit.

Group roles (rotate them)

■ LEADER Keeps the group on task. Watches the time. Asks 'what should we do next?' Doesn't tell people what to do.	—■ SCRIBE Writes down the group's ideas. Doesn't decide what gets written — captures what the group agrees on.
■■ REPORTER Shares the group's findings with the class at the end. Speaks for the group, not for themselves.	■ INCLUDER Makes sure everyone has spoken. Notices if someone's been quiet. 'Sam, what do you think?'
■ CHECKER Asks 'have we answered the question?' Reads back what the group has done. Catches mistakes.	■ ROTATE Roles change every few lessons. Everyone gets a turn at every role. No one is permanently 'the leader.'

Voice levels



■ Voice 0 — Silent When listening to the teacher. When someone else is reporting back.	■ Voice 1 — Whisper When working with one partner. Just the two of you can hear.
■ Voice 2 — Group voice When discussing in your group. Your own group can hear; other groups can't.	■ Voice 3 — Class voice When speaking to the whole class. Everyone can hear clearly.

How to disagree well

Listen first Hear the whole idea before you object. Often you'll understand it differently after listening fully.	Disagree with the IDEA, not the PERSON 'I'm not sure that idea will work because...' is fine. 'You're wrong' is not.
Offer an alternative Don't just shoot ideas down. If you don't like an idea, propose another.	Sometimes you have to compromise If the group is split, take a vote. Or try one idea, then try the other. Or combine them.

Sharing the work

Everyone contributes If you've finished your part, help someone else. No one sits and watches.	Strongest at it isn't the only one who does it If only one person is good at writing neatly, the others still take turns. That's how everyone learns.
Don't take over Even if you have a great idea, share it — don't dictate it. The point is COLLABORATIVE, not individual.	Ask for help If you're stuck, ask the group. That's what the group is for.

Setting it up

1. **TEACH IT EXPLICITLY.** Spend a full lesson on group work norms before the first proper group activity. Demonstrate. Practise. 2. **ASSIGN ROLES.** For the first half-term, you assign roles. Children gradually learn to do this themselves. 3. **DON'T LEAVE GROUPS TOO LONG.** Children's attention spans for group work are 10-15 minutes for K-Y2, 15-25 minutes for older. Plan accordingly. 4. **CHECK IN.** Walk around. Listen. 'Group 3, what role is everyone on?' Catches problems early. 5. **DEBRIEF.** After the activity, 2 minutes. 'What went well? What was tricky?' This builds the skill.

