

Birth Order Exercise

GOAL: To help participants meet each other in an active manner which sets the stage for exploration, self-disclosure and group discussion about stereotypes.

TIME REQUIRED: 45 minutes

MATERIALS: Overhead transparencies of discussion questions to be used in small groups.

PHYSICAL SETTING: Space enough to break into smaller groups for discussion.

PROCESS: Introduce activity as one in which participants will begin to explore beliefs about how people are different.

Instruct participants to break into smaller groups on the basis of their birth order (only child, first born, middle child, last born). If participants identify more with one group although technically they belong in another, ask them to join the group with which they most identify (e.g. last born feels like only child due to large gap after birth of older sibling). Instruct subgroups about where to form.

Once in smaller groups, display these discussion questions on overhead: Talk about what it was like to be a first-born child, etc.; What was positive and negative about being in your birth order?; Have there been any lasting effects with your parents and siblings? Allow 10 minutes for discussion.

After small group discussion, choose one of the groups to remain silent and request that the members of the other birth order groups share with the large group responses to the following questions: What do you think it's like being first-born/middle, etc. (whichever group has been asked to be silent)? What kinds of personality characteristics do you associate with first borns, middle children, etc. (whichever group has been asked to be silent)? Any variations? Do these characteristics hold true across all people? If not, why? Then ask the silent group: What was it like to hear comments about you being made by others? What feelings did you have as you listened? Did you agree or disagree? How would you respond to what has just been said about you? Allow 20 minutes for this process.

Repeat the above exercise with the other birth order groups.

When all groups have been addressed, note the process of stereotyping, how it begins at an early age based on assumptions that are overly general, and how it might, at times, serve as a self-fulfilling prophecy. Use this activity as a segue into discussions or activities addressing cultural prejudice and stereotyping.

SOURCE: Leader's Manual for Valuing Ethnic Diversity: A Cultural Awareness Workshop. Designed and written by the staff of the Counseling and Mental Health Center, The University of Texas at Austin, 303 West Mall Building, Austin, TX 78731-8119, 512/471-3515.