What Leaders Need to Know

If you asked kids to identify the assignment they dread the most, chances are that most of them would say “public speaking.” Speaking in front of their peers is probably even more nerve-wracking to them than speaking to a group of total strangers. Therefore, the goal of these public presentation materials is to help young people overcome their fear of public speaking and increase their public speaking skills in a nonthreatening environment.

Why Learn About Vocal Expression?

Public speaking can seem daunting, but if a young person develops these skills early on, the skills will be an asset throughout his or her life. People develop poise and self-confidence as they grow accustomed to standing before a crowd and sharing their thoughts and ideas.

As communication skills become more critical to the career world, so does the need for kids to learn these skills. It’s also important for them to experience early success with expressing themselves. This means that even though you may be afraid of public speaking because of bad experiences in the past or lack of experience, it’s time to put your fears aside and really encourage your members to stand up and speak up! Many kids don’t take the chance to practice public speaking because the people around them make it sound scarier than it is.

The activities in this section of the Communications Toolkit should make public speaking seem fun, not impossible. This requires you to create an environment where all levels of participation are applauded, regardless of the speaker’s age or skill level.

A Comfortable Setting

Many of the activities mention doing them “in a comfortable setting.” Creating a comfortable setting will take some thought and planning. Keep in mind that young people, like adults, have a variety of personality types. That means that some kids will naturally be more outgoing than others. Try not to push them too hard or too fast. Encourage them to share ideas using a variety of methods. As they become more comfortable with sharing their ideas and with the reactions their actions receive, they’ll be more adventurous in the projects they undertake.

Life Skills

Participating in the public speaking warm-ups and activities in this section will help young people develop their ability to:

- Organize their thoughts and ideas.
- Communicate information to someone else in a confident and convincing manner.
- Problem-solve and be flexible (for example, overcoming stage nerves or adapting information to different audiences and situations).
- Use resources wisely (specifically, to honor the time allotted for a presentation or speech)!
- Develop useful, marketable skills (for example, speech writing and delivery techniques).
- Manage stress and feelings.
- Evaluate their work and set goals for improvement.

Self-Assessment & Evaluation

After each activity or project you lead with young people, please help them think about what they learned. Make copies of the “What I Learned” self-evaluation form on page 8 and distribute them to your group. Ask them to think quietly about the questions and make notes about what they learned, how they feel about their skills in that area and what they’d like to learn more about. Then lead a discussion with the whole group and ask if anyone wants to share what they came up with. Young people may want to keep their “What I Learned” forms to refer to later and as a way to document their learning process.

Public Speaking in Other Projects

The skills young people learn while practicing public presentations translate well to other project areas and should be integrated into project activities whenever possible. Part of the experiential learning model is giving kids a chance to share with others what they’ve learned about a particular subject. By demonstrating a skill or illustrating an idea before a group, kids are
practicing their public speaking skills and gaining confidence. Soon it will seem natural to them to express their ideas without a thought about how scary public speaking “should be.”

You May Want to Know

You may want to know the following points before getting started with helping young people learn more about public speaking.

1. The basic processes for writing and delivering a speech or demonstration (see the “Writing for Public Speaking,” “Delivering a Vocal Presentation” and “Overcoming Stage Nerves” skill sheets located on pp. 35, 31 and 34, respectively).

2. How to help kids evaluate and feel good about their experiences in communication (see the “What I Learned” sheet on pg. 8).

3. Where to go for field trips, where to find speakers to visit or how to find out who’s talking around town.

4. The developmental needs of the kids in your group (see the Ages and Stages of Child and Youth Development publication which is available from Purdue University on the World Wide Web at [http://www.agcom.purdue.edu/AgCom/Pubs/NCR/NCR-292.html]).

Who’s Talking Around Town?

To connect the idea of vocal expression to careers and make public speaking come alive for your group, you may want to arrange a group visit with someone who uses public speaking as a major part of his or her job, such as:

- Actors
- Lawyers
- Lobbyists
- Managers
- Ministers
- Politicians
- Presidents of professional associations and civic organizations
- Professional speakers
- Radio broadcasters
- Teachers
- Telephone operators
- Television personalities
- Tour guides

Many organizations, such as Toastmasters and Optimists Clubs, focus on communication skills and may be good sources of guest speakers.

Beyond the Toolkit: More Ideas & Resources

To encourage your group to learn more about public speaking and vocal expression, refer to the “Video, Media and Technology” and “Visual Communication and Graphic Design” sections of the Communications Toolkit.

The World Wide Web and other sections of the Internet offer information on developing vocal expression skills. Use the general categories listed here as search terms with any of the Internet search engines: “public speaking,” “vocal expression,” “speeches,” “speech writing,” “speakers.” You could also have the participants come up with their own set of search terms. (See pg. 134 for information on Internet safety.)