



Tip Sheet

OPRE Report #2022-156

Strategies for Debriefing in the Classroom

Facilitators of youth education and prevention programs are always looking for ways to deepen learning, including by helping youth make connections between program content and their own lives. A guided discussion or “debrief” after an activity or lesson can help youth make these connections.

What is debriefing?

A debrief is a guided discussion that draws out reflections on an experience. It makes a lesson stick. During a debrief, youth discuss their take-aways from a class activity or discussion and relate it to their lives.

You don’t need to wait until the end of the lesson to debrief. Debriefing can and should be ongoing throughout the lesson to draw out key concepts.

! **Caution:** Leading an effective debrief takes intentional planning, ongoing learning, and practice. Your first try might not be perfect, but with practice, your reward will be deeper learning for youth.

Using a debriefing sequence to guide a debrief

One way to structure a debrief is to use a set of questions that begin with the following prompts:

What?, So What?, Now What? The prompts go in order and build on each other.

What? questions ask youth to describe what happened during an activity or lesson. They prompt the group to reflect on what they experienced in the classroom.

✓ **Tip:** You can use short activities to help draw out the **What?**

Activity: Stoplight. Give each youth three colored index cards. One is red, which means the activity was difficult or the youth wanted it to stop; one is yellow, which means it was difficult, but they managed it okay; and one is green, which means it was easy and felt comfortable or natural. Instruct youth to respond to your questions by holding up the color that best describes their reactions.

So What? questions empower youth to reflect on and interpret how the lesson content relates to their lives. Ask youth what the activity or lesson meant to them.

Now What? questions challenge youth to think ahead in applying the lesson content to real-life situations.

! **Caution:** Use questions to guide youth to discover connections on their own rather than telling them where things connect.

Although debriefing is important, it can be hard to make time for it.

Strategy: Plan ahead to build time for debriefing into your lesson. In planning, (1) prepare debrief questions for the end of the lesson and after key activities and (2) select a hard-stop time when you will end your lesson and transition to the final debrief.

Strategy: Modify these example debriefing questions to guide your debrief.

What...

- did you see during the activity?
- did you hear others say during the activity?
- challenges did the group face?

So What...

- did you learn about [topic of the day] through the activity?
- did you contribute to the success of the activity?
- did the activity reinforce or highlight in terms of what you are doing well?

Now What...

- could you do to reduce the consequences or effects this has on your relationships?
- could you do to use [topic, skill, or lesson] in the future?
- do you think is the most important thing to remember from this activity or lesson?



Tips for a strong debrief

Be an active listener by paraphrasing youths' comments back to them. React neutrally and without judgment to leave space for other youth to add to the discussion.

Strategy: To stay neutral, use words like “Thanks,” “Nice,” or “Sure” rather than positive or negative phrases like “That was great,” “Excellent,” or “That’s not right.”

Have a few short activities in your back pocket in case you run out of time for a full debrief.



Activity: One-Word Whip. Youth share one word that sums up their feelings about the activity or lesson. Ask youth for one thing they learned, one word that summarizes how they feel, or one thing they weren't sure about.



Activity: Pair and Share. Instead of leading a full group discussion, have youth pair up and share with each other their responses to your questions.

Adjust your techniques for groups of various sizes or with different needs.

Some groups might be less talkative than others.

Clear guidelines provide structure to manage a large group.

Strategy: Establish the 2+2 rule: After someone shares a comment during the debrief, they must wait until at least two other people have spoken or two minutes have passed before sharing again.

Immediately reflect on your practice either on your own, by talking with a co-facilitator, or by journaling. Debriefing by yourself or with your co-facilitator after each session is an important way to improve your own practice.



Tip: Show patience during moments of silence and allow at least 30 seconds for youth to respond.

The tips and activities for debriefing contained in this tip sheet are explained in more detail in “Strengthening Facilitation Skills: A Training Curriculum for Programs Working with Youth,” a resource from the Office of Family Assistance (OFA) and Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) in the Administration for Children and Families. The curriculum and supporting materials are available on the OPRE website.