

# Table of Contents

What It's All About.....	6
How to Do It.....	8
Humble Confidence.....	10
Types of Small Group Activities ...	12

## Introductions

Name Toss .....	14
Instant Replay.....	15
Name Alliteration.....	16
Knee Bop.....	17
Acronyms.....	18
Sweet.....	19
Roll It Out.....	20
Drop It.....	21
Friend or Foe?.....	22
Life Story.....	23
Name and Nickname.....	24
Letter Count.....	25
In the Parade .....	26
A Star.....	27
Memory in the Middle .....	28
ID Me .....	29
Hand Impressions .....	30
5 Things About My Friend .....	32
Creative Introductions.....	33
Alphabet Line .....	34
Your Idea(s).....	35

## Icebreakers

Electricity .....	37
Snap, Crackle, Pop.....	38
Zip, Zap, Zop .....	40
Stand Up.....	41
Human Knot.....	42
Pop, Fizz .....	43
Moving to the Truth .....	44
Line Up.....	45

Lap Sit.....	46
Sum It Up .....	47
Mirrors .....	48
What Did You Say? .....	49
Keep It Up .....	50
Human Spring .....	51
Forced Choices.....	52
Left or Right? .....	53
The Airport Exchange .....	54
Today I Am.....	55
Number Count.....	56
Toe Tapping .....	57
Turn Around Count.....	58
Mind Reading .....	59
Ro Sham Bo Train .....	60
Rhythm Hunter .....	61
Touch Blue .....	62
Round and Round .....	63
Mingle, Mingle.....	64
Your Idea(s).....	65

## Interactions – Low Risk

Clothespins .....	67
Grab It.....	68
Elephant, Motorcycle, Palm Tree .....	69
Animal Farm.....	70
Human Top .....	72
Feeling the Tug.....	73
Over, Under, Through.....	74
3 Truths and 1 Lie .....	76
Monster Walk .....	77
Here's What I See .....	78
Impulse.....	88
Group Juggling .....	90
Out of the Hat (low risk round) .....	92

Ready-2-Roll (low risk dice) .....	94
Personal Coat of Arms .....	96
I've Never... .....	98
Your Idea(s).....	99

**Interactions –  
Medium Risk**

Trust Fall .....	101
I'd Like to Get to Know You.....	102
I'll Bet You Didn't Know .....	105
Out of the Hat (medium risk square).....	106
Ready-2-Roll (medium risk dice).....	108
Group Charades .....	110
Under the String .....	112
Picasso .....	113
Who? Where? What? .....	121
Trust Walk .....	124
Q4U Cards .....	125
Your Idea(s).....	128

**Interactions – High Risk**

Spiritual Journey.....	130
My Friends.....	131
Affirmation Circle.....	133
Highs and Lows .....	134
I've Got a Question .....	135
Ready-2-Roll (high risk dice).....	136
Out of the Hat (high risk octagon) .....	138
One of My Favorites .....	140
Give and Take .....	141
Your Idea(s).....	142

**Indings**

Cinnamon Roll.....	144
Popcorn Prayers .....	145
Yarn Spinning.....	146
Quaker Questions.....	147
Conversational Prayer.....	148
Categorically Praying .....	149
Hands In.....	150
I Saw Jesus .....	151
Your Idea(s).....	152

**Extras for You**

Planning Sheets.....	154
Example for Session 1 .....	156
Example for Session 2 .....	157
Example for Session 3 .....	158
How to Debrief After an Activity .....	159
List of Materials.....	160

# What It's All About

Friendship, fellowship, community, belonging, relationships, intimacy, connections. These synonyms describe what many people desire, but few experience.

I'm a youth ministry guy, and I know that young people want to experience these things. But often they need something or someone to help them get there. At times, just having a meaningful conversation seems out of reach.

But I've also found this isn't limited to young people. In fact, people of all ages want this. But you can't vote it into existence, or take a pill, or turn on a switch to make it happen. It usually requires risk with potential failure as well as potential success. Some aren't willing to put themselves out there. I've seen it occur when people go through difficult circumstances together. I've even seen simulations be as effective as real life experiences. It can happen in a small way or a large way. Sometimes things flop and other times they go way beyond expectations.

As a youth pastor, I found myself always on the lookout for group-building activities. Even groups of people who know each other may need an "icebreaker" to get started, to focus, or to move from a "sit in the pew" state to involvement. In youth ministry we aren't afraid to borrow, steal, tweak, or make over an idea or activity we like. We can't remember where we got the idea, so we simply quote Solomon: "There's nothing new under the sun" (Ecclesiastes 1:9).

This collection of group-building activities has grown over the years. As a youth pastor, I kept adding to my "bag of tricks." Pat Mutch asked me to put together a collection for Youth-2-Youth, a drug prevention program that included building a cohesive youth group. Later, Brett Hadley and I teamed up to pool our respective collections of these types of activities for Ron Stretter and the youth ministry team in the Northern California Conference. I think they are still using those binders of activities for youth retreats. Steve Yeagley has invited me to be part of Freshman Orientation at Andrews University for the past 10 years. He has me train student leaders to give new freshmen a head start by connecting with others right during orientation.

I learned how to do "The Human Knot" from Tim Hansel. Then I read about it in Denny Rydberg's classic: *Building Community in Youth Groups*. Who came up with it first? Probably both of them learned it from someone else, maybe Lyman Coleman. Or was it Karl Rohnke's *Silver Bullets or Funn Stuff?*

Most of the activities described in this book are not original with me. You might do the same activity but call it by a different name. Your explanation could differ slightly from mine. If you are the originator of the idea, thanks for sharing it. Indeed, there's nothing new under the sun. But if you need credit, just write your name on the cover of the book.

My thanks to AdventSource for publishing my current collection. Feel free to use these activities, adjust or adapt them, and add your own to the mix. What I've found to be truly original is what happens when a person does activities like these in their own way. It always seems to be a new experience.

While I wish people thought of me as a great preacher, they are more likely to think of my bag of toys I use for group-building activities as I travel to different parts of the world for youth events or youth ministry training. Mission agencies like Maranatha ask me to share these to start mission trips with *group building* before *construction building*. When I cross paths with people I've seen in ministry settings, they usually remember the activities more than anything I said.

Let's acknowledge that sometimes people are reticent to engage in these kinds of activities and even criticize those who "play childish games" instead of doing serious things for God. Even Christ's well-meaning disciples tried to keep the children away from Jesus. That's not much different than the frosty Pharisees admonishing Jesus to tell the children to be quiet. How ironic! "Letting out the child within" allows people to become more real than maintaining the masks that develop over time and possibly become encasements void of life, laughter, and love.

Frankly, these activities are fun. And when people have fun, they are much more open to growth, including spiritual growth. That's why I'm in favor of doing these, even though they may seem silly or frivolous to an outsider. Come inside and be part of the group. Amazing things can happen when you stop propping up your imaginary self and join the fun and growth that happens when you connect with others and with God.



- Estimate the amount of time needed for each activity.
- Stop an activity at the peak of its enjoyment.

### **Adapt as Needed**

- Call what you see, such as “You almost have it” or “This really isn’t working so let’s drop it and move on.”
- As the leader, you can influence, but you can’t control the group
- The leader is the rudder, not the entire ship.
- If the group doesn’t go deeper when the opportunity comes, return to lighter, physical games; then try going deeper later.
- To encourage more talking or interaction, divide into subgroups.
- At the end of each section, we’ve included a blank page for you to write in your own ideas for that type of activity.

### **Some Generalizations**

It’s usually best to have a co-leader or assistant. When you do, the co-leader helps with materials or props and also fills in gaps. A co-leader should sit opposite the leader rather than next to the leader. This enables you to divide-and-conquer as well as having ideal face and eye contact with each other. Usually the best formation is sitting in a circle. Bring the circle in tighter when talking or with more intimate activities. Consider the surrounding space. In general, males like activity and shy away from deep conversations, while females are often ready to talk and to talk deeply. Coed groups have a different dynamic than a group of all females or all males.

### **SHOP**

This acronym takes a group beyond the superficial to the heart of the matter. I don’t like to start with the Bible in small groups because people tend give clichés rather than what’s really on their heart. So I prefer to begin with silly games or else Bible study becomes a silly game instead of God drawing us to himself. Through the activities we want people in the small group to have conversations that are:

- S** = Spiritual—God and connecting with Him is the goal.
- H** = Honest—Tell the truth; no “pat” answers.
- O** = Open—Share with others from your heart; take a risk.
- P** = Personal—Speak for yourself, not in generalities.

# Humble Confidence

Those who lead group-building activities need to have humble confidence. What is “humble confidence”? The term seems strange—either an oxymoron or a paradox.

An oxymoron combines two opposites. Here are some examples:

- Pretty ugly
- Found missing
- Act natural
- Seriously funny
- Jumbo shrimp
- Deafening silence
- Clearly confused

You probably have some favorites and might even use some in regular conversations. Is “humble confidence” an oxymoron, combining two opposite words into one term?

Leaders who treat “humble confidence” as an oxymoron either lead with such humility that nobody follows or they lead with such confidence that nobody wants to be around them.

What if “humble confidence” is a paradox rather than an oxymoron? A paradox also combines two items. However, putting them together either creates a contradiction or it reveals a tension between the two things that are true. Here are some examples:

- They have a love-hate relationship.
- One thing is certain: There are no absolutes.
- The tortoise beats the hare.
- Those who surrender win.
- The greatest must be the least.
- Only by dying can a person live.

In order to lead a group with “humble confidence,” the leader needs a focus on Jesus. A high view of Jesus puts us in our proper place. The humble portion of this addresses our human inadequacy and uncertainty. Even if others consider us to be great, we recognize that depends on the comparison. Compared to Jesus, we are nothing. He is God; we aren’t. That leads to dependence on Jesus.

The confident portion of this also finds its root in Jesus. Because of who Jesus is, He can do absolutely anything through us. The Bible describes seemingly impossible things God did through ordinary or deficient people. The key factor is God. The human part seems to be a matter of saying

“Yes” to God and then trusting Him. This results in God-confidence rather than self-confidence.

What is “humble confidence” for a leader? By depending on Jesus, leaders don’t trust themselves to lead, but they trust Jesus to do so through them. They lead with both humility and confidence because of Christ. They lead with “humble confidence.”

If you lead in group-building activities, there are certain sociological dynamics that are somewhat predictable. But you can’t control or dictate what an individual or what a group does. You can invite and model openness, but you can’t force people to share on a deeper level. And you certainly can’t make the supernatural happen. If you lead group-building activities, you really, really need “humble confidence.”



# Types of Small Group Activities

**Introductions** — Activities used only the first few times a group meets, usually when people don't yet know each other and need to start by learning each others' names. They are of the ice breaker variety, and have the potential to set the tone for what the group will be. Go for it!

**Icebreakers** — Activities designed to get things going at the start and help the individuals start to become a group. Helpful even when a group already knows each other, these types of activities can launch a group and are usually necessary when a group reconvenes. These can also be used partway through a small group time just for fun or to refocus the group.

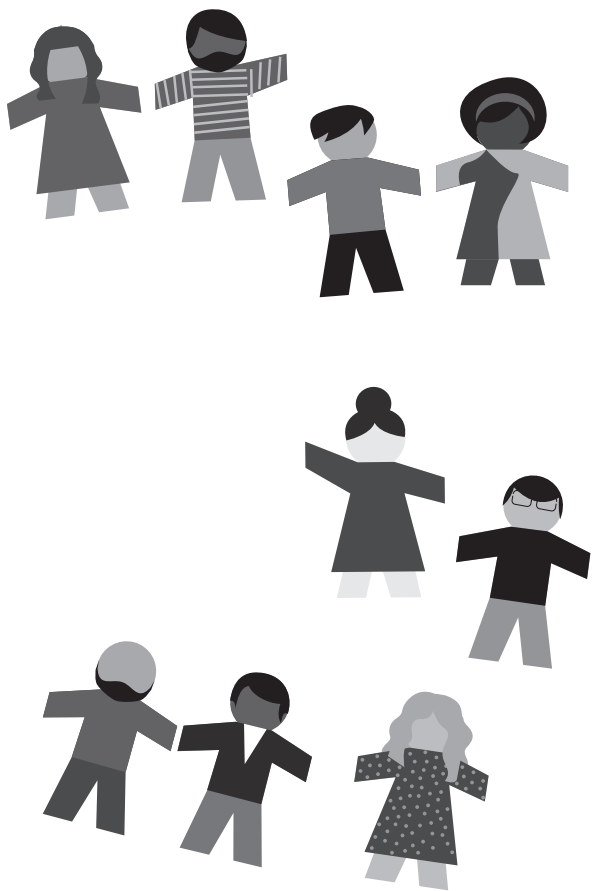
**Interactions** — The “work” portion of a small group in which the group seeks to develop deeper levels of trust by doing activities, sharing history and personal outlooks, feelings, insights, hopes and dreams, frustrations, etc. These activities are divided into low, medium, and high risk levels of intimacy. Start with the low risk activities and proceed to deeper levels as the group is able, based on shared experiences and learning to trust one another. Be sensitive to move to increased intimacy or to back off to less vulnerable elements in the give-and-take as a group develops.

**Low Risk** — Fun-and-game types of activities that have the potential for debriefing at whatever level the group is ready to move to. Often these are high-energy games with a limited amount of sharing.

**Medium Risk** — The fun element is still present, but the group is moving beyond just fun-and-games and starts to share personal and meaningful things. This might not be highly vulnerable stuff, but it establishes more history and trust continues to develop.

**High Risk** — The activity level decreases but the talking and sharing increases and deepens. Sometimes one basic activity can set the entire group into serious reflection. It might be one person sharing something very personal that will set the stage for others to feel secure enough and safe enough to share their story or part of it in this caring environment.

**Indings** — Activities to tie off a group gathering with some type of meaningful push, summary, commitment, or sharing. This makes it more memorable than simply saying, “I guess it's time to quit now.”



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# Introductions

# Name Toss

**Goal:** To learn names of the people in your group.

**Optimum Group Size:** 8-20.

**Materials Needed:** 5-10 balls to toss.

**Time Needed:** 5-10 minutes, depending on group size.

## Activity Described:

Stand in a circle with a little space between people.

The leader asks the name of someone in the circle by saying, “What is your name?” The leader then calls out the name of that person and tosses the ball to them. That person must call out the name of the leader. If the person doesn’t know the leader’s name, simply ask, “What is your name?” The person must call out the name.

Then person two asks another person in the circle for their name, then calls out their name and tosses the ball to them. After catching or retrieving the ball, that person must call out the name of the person who tossed the ball to them. Everyone is getting to hear these names repeated.

This continues, each person calling out the name of the person before tossing the ball, and the one who receives the ball calls out the name of the person who tossed it.

After people are getting the hang of this, the leader adds a second ball so two people are calling out the names of two different people at the same time. You can even add more balls gradually. Catching the ball isn’t the thing; learning names by calling them out repeatedly is what matters.