

A–Z of teaching young learners: Pair work and group work

What and why?

The time that children spend in English lessons is usually quite short. If they are only allowed to talk to the teacher, most children will not have the opportunity to say very much – if anything. Working in pairs or small groups means that more children have more opportunity to talk more. More importantly, however, children need the space and opportunity to be who they are. Group work in small groups or pair work gives them the ‘psychological space’ to do this. It can give them the space to exchange ideas and to be creative. It can provide a change of pace and variety. Whole class work for a long time, particularly with a large class, demands a lot of attention and concentration in one ‘mode’ – more than most children are able to give. It is important to provide opportunities for group work or pair work, but it is equally important that this is set up correctly. If it isn’t, you will almost certainly end up with classroom management problems!

Practical ideas

- Before the children work in pairs or groups, make sure they know exactly what they have to do. You can give the instructions in both English and the mother tongue, and you can give an example by asking one or two children in front of the class.
- While they are working, you can go around the class, listening and helping.
- It is usually best to limit the time for pair work. Ensure that the children have enough time to do the task and that the focus is clear. If you allow too much time, they will lose the focus and not see the point of what they are doing. It is equally important not to allow too little time. This can cause frustration and confusion.
- Ensure that any work that you ask them to do in pairs has a concrete focus – that it is clear to them what you expect. For example, set tasks that have a practical outcome, such as making a list of words or reading a dialogue, rather than something very general such as discussing an idea.
- Some children will certainly finish before others. In this case, have short extra exercises available. The King Cat’s fun pages in the Activity Book can be used for this purpose.
- Small groups can give themselves a name, such as the name of a colour or an animal. If groups re-form from time to time, they can choose a new name.