

CONNECTIONS

I learned the activities in this sequence from a variety of people – most notably from Mike Spiller and Mark Collard. AND a super-special thanks to Jennifer Steinmetz for helping me work out some of the critical details to this one. Thanks my friends, you bless the world.

FACILITATED OBJECTIVES:

Explore behaviors related to learning names, asking for help, and physical safety. Explore concepts of group norming, and expectations.

NEEDS & NUMBERS:

No equipment needed for this one, but you do need a nice open area that will fit the movement of your group size. Connections plays well with big groups of 30 to 52 participants.

TIME:

15 to 25 minutes.

PROCEDURE:

Connections is a series of four activities (experiences) that can be used at the beginning of a program day with a larger (30 to 50 person) group of participants that do not know each other very well. The progression of the activities moves from “light” touch interactions (fist bumps) to “all hands connected” (right hand to right hand and left hand to ankle – yes, ankle).

I use this combination of activities in the order presented below to first emphasize getting, practicing, and learning names, AND then to introduce the group to a simple (large) group challenge that will require certain behaviors (e.g., talking) to be successful. After my participants know that they can choose to participate in the following activities at the level they are comfortable with, we get started.

Before sharing the first connection this is what I like to tell my groups:

I will be presenting to you a series of connections. First, I'll explain what the connection will be and the requirements of that connection. Then, I will ask if there are any questions. After answering any questions I will ask, 'Are you ready?' If you are, simply say 'Ready!' If you are

Connection Sequence: Icebreaker/Warm-Ups to Group Challenge

Sequence Objective

This sequence of connections is designed to help participants learn each others names and to also participate in a simple challenge to introduce them to the type of experience they will be a part of during their program.

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not ready say, 'No' and we will work out what is needed. When everyone is ready I will say, 'connect' – please don't make any connections until you hear me say 'connect'. When the time is up for the particular connection I will say, 'disconnect' – at this time please stop where you are and be ready for the next set of connection information. Does anyone have any questions about the expectations? Okay, let's find out the first connection.

This initial briefing helps me to scaffold the experience up to the final Limbs-to-Limbs connection challenge. I want my groups to understand (and practice) when to connect and when to disconnect in order to avoid one of the possible safety issues in Limbs-to-Limbs (one that will be detailed below).

Okay, let's get to the connections.

Fist Bumps – For this first connection I simply ask everyone to mingle around throughout the group (slowly) nicely fist bumping other participants with either a left or right fist. I will always provide a little demo of the horizontal, vertical, and “X” fist bumps (we like choices, right) – don't assume everyone knows what a “fist bump” entails. Be sure to demo. AND, be sure to get in on the connections as well if you don't feel the need to keep an eye on the group for this one.

NOTE: There have been groups – both youth and adult groups – where I've had to have a lengthy discussion about my expectations of “nicely” and “fist-to-fist” bumps, not “fist-to-something else” bumps. When you get that feeling in your gut or you observe behaviors contradictory to your expectations, stop and have the talk.

With each fist bump, during the mingle, the two bumpers should share first names and repeat each other's name before seeking out another fist bump from someone else (it's okay to stop moving and repeat names). I tell my groups this first connection will be about three minutes long, so it's completely okay to fist bump your new friends more than once. If they connect up with someone they've bumped before each can try to remember and call out the other's name during the bump or, if there is that struggling pause, help can be provided (sharing names again).

After sharing the expectation I ask, “Are you ready?” If so, I say, “Connect!” After three minutes (or so) I call out 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, disconnect.”

Again, as with all of these connections, continue to remind the participants that this time together can be used to help them learn names through re-connecting and practicing. After three minutes (or so), call your “disconnect” with the expectation that everyone is quite and standing still, ready for the next connection.

2) Handshake Switch – The second connection involves a traditional (common in the “States”) palm-to-palm handshake with a slight extension. As we know, this handshake is most often initiated with the right hand so everyone's first handshake will be with his/her right hand. Then, here's the extension. After this right-handed shake the left hand **MUST** be used for the next shake. This means participants will need to find someone with a left hand

available to shake. In other words after shaking with the right hand you need to shake someone's left hand with your left hand before using your right hand again to shake.

Here's a tip I offer to help keep things straight. After shaking someone's hand, say a right handed shake, put this (right) hand behind your back and then stick your left hand out in preparation for the next shake you are required to make. Then, look for someone who is extending the same hand and connect with a shake. After that shake bring the hand behind your back in front and the shaking hand goes behind your back.

Just like in the first connection, remind the participants that this is another three-minute opportunity to learn and practice names. It's perfectly okay to shake someone's hand more than once. In fact it's probably a really good idea to do so in order to practice those names you don't know. When everyone is good to go, start the second connection.

After sharing the expectation of this second connection I ask, "Are you ready?" If so, I say, "Connect!" After three minutes (or so) I call out 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, disconnect."

3) Handshake Switch & Hold – This third connection involves the palm-to-palm handshake like the one in the second connection, but with another extension. Everyone starts out with a right-handed handshake, however this right-handed connection may not be broken until BOTH participants start a left-handed handshake with someone else in the group. (This requirement is like a right and left grand in square dancing – if you've been there.)

Be sure to inform your participants that this "is NOT a race" – new handshakes do not need to be made RIGHT (or LEFT) AWAY. Make a shake, share and/or practice names, then look for the next connections before letting go of the old. AND, be mindful to keep your arm STRONG while still in a shake hold – there tends to be a little tugging, so remind your participants to be careful. (Never hesitate to stop all action and remind the group about keeping each other safe if you see behavior that needs to change.)

At this level of connection, in my experience, the "task" (making and releasing shake connections) tends to outweigh the development of "relationships" (getting, practicing, and saying names). I simply do the best I can to remind my group about the opportunity to practice and learn names. I often find this a really great talking point to explore (task versus relationships) before going into the final connection (challenge).

NOTE: You'll need to decide how important it is to you that the participants stay connected to their "old" shake until they have a new one. This is what tends to happen. One partner will have his/her new handshake and then (really) wants to let go of the old, but according to the requirements the other partner can't let go until he/she has a new handshake. In that connection for the partners there's the need to "move on" by one and a need to "stay" by the other. WOW, another interesting talking point. Again, decide how much you want to emphasize, and stick to, the "BOTH" rule.

After sharing the expectation I ask, "Are you ready?" If so, I say, "Connect!" After three minutes (or so) I call out 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, disconnect."

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If I feel the group is open to it, I invite them to discuss some talking points I've noticed throughout the first three connections (some ideas shared above and lots more down in the Observations/Questions section below). If it's a BIG group, I tend to use more closed-ended questions and ask for a "hand-up" response to see who's having the same experiences. However, these questions have a way of opening up deeper conversations, so go for it if it opens up.

4) Limbs-to-Limbs – This final connection is the group challenge. (I learned it as Snake Pit from Mike Spiller.) First and foremost, be sure to emphasize to the group they are not to connect until you say, "connect," (after everyone is "ready" right?). They will have time to plan out the connections, but, again, no physical contact prior to the connection call.

The overall objective is to have ALL THE HANDS in the group connected at one time, for five seconds, in the following way:

- Everyone's right hand will be in a handshake connection with someone else's right hand (no need to shake up and down).
- Everyone's left hand will be connected to someone else's left ankle.
- Everyone is connected to two different people.

Again, remind the group not to make any physical contact with each other until you call connect. Ask them to simply plan their connects. It takes a couple of minutes (or more) for everyone to be "ready" so walk around and answer questions, observe the process taking place, and when it seems like the time call, "ready." When everyone has responded in the affirmative you are going to share one more logistical piece of information that goes something like this:

When I say the word, you know the one, I am going to count down from 5 to 1 and then say disconnect – please let go of all connections at this time. If at any point in during the count down there is a connection that might lead to a problem, like someone falling over or hurting a wrist area, please let go of the connection. Do your best to be mindful of your connections and take care of yourself and others. Again, the overall goal is to have all hands appropriately connected during the 5-second countdown. So, are you 'READY?'

After this information some people might not be ready – they'll want to make sure everyone around them is on the same page. Call another "ready" when needed and then give the call to "connect." Then, "5, 4, 3, 2, 1, disconnect!"

Don't be surprised if some participants have fallen to the ground/floor due to losing their balance (the left ankle connection is often the culprit). The falls are not usually super dynamic since the right hand connections offer some support. The hope is that the participants will take care of each other (avoiding falls) during the challenge – this is one of the best talking points around keeping themselves and others safe during the program you have together.

One of the most powerful talking points has to do with how the participants interpret the parameters. Almost to the group, they all believe they must lift their left ankles off the ground

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so someone else can make the ankle connection, when in fact is (which many groups figure out after one or two tries), if they squat down so that both feet stay on the ground/floor it's a much safer experience. (AND, in some cases parts of the big group figure this out without telling the rest of the group – only revealing their “ingenious” plan after “connect” is called. Another great talking point.)

Okay, with all this said, after you call “disconnect” you are going to ask the group two questions. “Please raise your right hand if it was not connected to someone else for the five seconds.” Count quickly and share the number with everyone – celebrate if appropriate (remember, a 30% batting average is great in baseball). If all hands were connected then for sure a celebration is in order. Then, “Please raise your left hand if it was not connected to someone else for the five seconds.” Count the hands (it's usually higher) and share the number with the group.

At this point we now have some data to work with going into another try at this connection (if another try is appropriate – maybe your group is 100% connected on the first try. Then go into the talking points that made this possible before moving on.)

As the group knows, the goal is to have ALL THE HANDS connected for the five seconds. Give them some time to plan out their next attempt before asking if they are “ready” to go. If you noticed any (potential) safety issues during the last attempt spend a little time reminding the group to take care of each other – you might even need to be more specific on what you expect (e.g., “If someone is losing his/her balance left go of his/her ankle!”).

In my experience it can take in could take up to four tries for 100% success (sometimes just two tries). The best solution I've seen is one big circle where every other person steps into the circle and then turns 180 degrees to face away from the center of the circle (works perfect with even numbered groups and in odd numbered groups have to work out a couple of limb cross-overs to make it work). Now, once “connect” is called, right hands go out into a handshake, and then everyone squats down and reaches to grab (with their left hand) the left ankle of the person in front of them (and slightly to the left). Easy! Right! (Well, when we know the answer it's easy.)

Problem solving is about anticipating (best case scenario) or recognizing (seeing) the problem(s) within a task and then doing something about them in order to be more successful with the task (if this is the goal). The Limbs-to-Limbs challenge gives us the opportunity to introduce this idea and begin talking about the behaviors that can help the group reach the success (goals) they are after.

SAFETY:

Most of the important safety issues were noted in each of the connections – but a quick reminder doesn't hurt. The first two connections are very low risk – so, you should be okay. For the Handshake Switch & Hold remind your group to be careful about tugging on someone's arm too hard – it's okay to let go if needed.

The Limbs-to-Limbs connection is the one with the most safety concerns. Prepare your group well on the procedures of when to connect and when to disconnect. AND, remind everyone to be mindful of each other. If they see (or feel) someone falling let go of the left ankle if this will help, or provide more support with the right hand if this will help. One of the major learnings of Limbs-to-Limbs is taking care of yourself and others. Be sure to overemphasize this point so your participants can take these safe behaviors with them into their program.

FACILITATION:

As presented above I like to use these connections as a forum for participants to get, practice, and learn each other's names. So, between each connection I will be sure to ask, "How many others in the group do you know? Raise your hand if you know the names of 5, 10, 15, 20 people." The hope is that after each connection everyone can add a few more names to the list of people they know.

When facilitating a larger group it is often challenging to get everyone's attention for a meaningful processing discussion (especially at first) – but when it's appropriate I always like to try. (There are ways to process with larger groups, but we'll save this topic for another day.) During this sequence I don't spend too much time on any one talking point between connections (sometimes I only ask about how they are learning names), but I do like to get my groups use to me asking them questions – even if they are closed-ended questions where I simply ask for a "hand-up" response.

Overall this sequence of connections is meant to be a fun, interactive, and challenging experience that will give your group a taste of what's ahead in their program.

OBSERVATIONS/QUESTIONS:

- How many of you think it's important to know the names of the people in your class/the people you work with? How many of you are "bad" at learning names? Why do you think that is? If you were "good" at learning names, how would this help you? What are some techniques you know for learning names?
- How many of you asked for help when you were practicing with names? How many of you avoided connecting with someone because you didn't remember his/her name from the first (or second) time you met? What prevents us from asking people for help? If you were more comfortable asking for help, how would that benefit your life?
- During this last connection how many of you felt physically safe? What behaviors (what we can see and hear) keep us safe? If you didn't feel safe please share the general behavior(s) that made you feel unsafe. Did anyone choose to stand off to the side (challenge out) because you felt it was unsafe? How could we make people feel safe in this group?
- When we decide on something we will all agree to do (or try to do) while working together, this is called group norming. We agree to behaviors that will benefit the group. Based on the connections we made in these last activities, what norms do we want to practice during our time together? What were the good things that happened

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during our connections? What behaviors do we want to see and hear as we work together today?

- Who can tell me what an expectation is? What do you expect of *me* during your program? What do you expect of *others* when you work together? How do we know that others understand our expectations? What do you do when people don't meet your expectations? What will be the best way to make our expectations clear to one another? What would you say is the "greatest" expectation of this group, right here, right now?

VARIATIONS:

- It might be enough for your particular group to simply do the first three connections and move on from there. Listen to your gut!
- If you know the activity Yurt Circle (Rohnke), this could substitute as your fourth connection (or you could add it as a fifth).

PHYSICAL EDUCATION GRADE LEVEL OUTCOMES:

(www.shapeamerica.org/standards/pe/)

- Middle School: S4.M1 – Exhibits responsible social & inclusive behaviors (connecting with everyone in the group); S4.M5 – Cooperates with multiple classmates on large group initiatives (challenges); S5.M3 – Recognizes individual challenges (learning names) and asks for help.
- High School: S4.H3 – Uses communication skills and strategies that promote team/group dynamics; S4.H5 – Applies best practices for participating safely in physical activity.

21st CENTURY LEARNING:

(www.p21.org)

- Creativity and Innovation: Elaborate, refine, analyze and evaluate ideas in order to improve.
- Critical Thinking and Problem Solving: Analyze how parts of a whole interact with each other to produce overall outcomes in complex systems (Limbs-to-Limbs).
- Communication and Collaboration: Communicate effectively in diverse environments; Exercise flexibility and willingness to be helpful in making necessary compromises to accomplish a common goal.
- Initiative and Self-Direction: Reflect critically on past experiences in order to inform future progress.
- Social and Cross-Cultural Skills: Conduct themselves in a respectable manner.
- Productivity and Accountability: Collaborate and cooperate effectively with teams.
- Leadership and Responsibility: Act responsibly with the interest of the larger community in mind.