

KITCHEN TABLE CONVERSATIONS

Engaging large groups of students of all ages in sustainability discussions

The 'kitchen table conversation' method has been used widely in Australia and more recently in Canberra to engage adults in the community in a consideration of big issues that affect their future. Teachers might also find them a helpful way to engage all of their students in a consideration of action to reduce Canberra's ecological footprint, and so feed into a whole school contribution to the Parliament of Youth on Sustainability.



What is a kitchen table conversation?

Kitchen table conversations are semi-structured conversations in which small groups of individuals (up to eight) spend a defined period listening to each other's ideas on a defined issue. One person acts as the host and another as the scribe for the discussion.

The conversation begins with an agreed agenda and an agreed set of ground rules, helped by the use of a talking object (eg a stone or a stuffed toy) which is picked up by the person who wants to speak and entitles that person to hold the floor until the object is relinquished and passed on to somebody else.

There is no attempt to reach consensus in the discussion but rather to share thinking on matters which might not otherwise be discussed with others or deeply considered.

Kitchen table conversation ground rules

The ground rules for a kitchen table conversation are:

- only the speaker (the person holding the talking object) speaks at any one time;
- everyone is entitled to have their say;
- speakers stay on the topic;
- no one dominates the conversation (if needed you may set a time limit of, say, one minute per speaker for each time they speak);
- participants listen respectfully to the speaker; and
- people's opinions are respected even if others disagree.

The host has the task of ensuring the ground rules are adhered to and that the discussion remains focused on the topic.

The scribe keeps notes of the discussion and after the discussion has finished, prepares a succinct (dot point) summary of the discussion which is checked with the participants for its accuracy. For younger students, a teacher or older student may assist with the role of scribe.

Many teachers already use a similar process called 'circle time'.

Example for using the method in schools

Show your class the video about the ecological footprint and earth overshoot day: sustainabilityillustrated.com/en/portfolio/earth-overshoot-day-2015-august-13/

Present information about Canberra's ecological footprint from:

www.environmentcommissioner.act.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0004/590836/Ecological-Footprint-Factsheet.pdf

Then divide the class into groups of between five and eight students who appoint a host and scribe from within the group and hold a kitchen table conversation on the question: **'What is the most important thing for us to do as individuals, Canberrans, Australians or as a world human society to reduce our ecological footprint?'**

The collected reports of these kitchen table conversations might then be used to identify the topic for the school's one-page Green Paper and a shortlist of possible proposals for action for development.

