Small group tips

1. These are your kiddos all week. . . invest and get to know them.
2. During free time hang with them!
3. Look for those kids that might need to connect with others. See if you can get them hooked up with a friend or two.
4. Avoid yes/no questions. Ask "why" or "how" questions that lead to discussion and when students give only short answers, ask them to elaborate
5. Don't fear silence. This may be the most difficult thing to do but it's absolutely essential. When we are responsible for facilitating a discussion, we tend to feel that a lack of response within one or two beats is stretching into an eternity. Kids need some time to think and formulate a response. You can try asking them to write down one or two ideas before you open up discussion. Or try handing out a list of discussion topics at the end of the session for the next session to give them time to think. Even so, there may be times when there is just no response. That's when you need to re-state the topic, use a different example, take only a part of it at a time, or throw out a "what if" scenario or devil's advocate proposition. But the important thing is to learn to bide your time and bite your tongue and wait for the students to respond.
6. When possible, set up the room for discussion. A circle works the best. Leaders should sit among the students, not two leaders sitting side by side. Leaders should become a discussion participant rather than a teacher.
7. Get to know the students' names and who they are. Students are more likely to be engaged with the group if addressed by name. Play some get to know you name games if you need help with this.
8. Provide positive feedback. If a kiddo is reluctant to speak up and then they make a contribution that no one comments on, they are not likely to try again. A simple thank you for their contribution even works. But it's much better to build on what the student has said, add an insight, ask others how they would respond to what the student said, and otherwise weave that contribution into the discussion. A recap of what has been discussed so far lets students know that you heard what they said, helps to reinforce main points, and often stimulates further discussion.
9. Show enthusiasm for the subject. You can't expect students to become interested in a discussion topic when the leader shows no enthusiasm. This usually means that the leader has not done his/her homework, a part of which is to think about what is interesting, why the subject is worthwhile or relevant, personal experience with the subject, how the topic relates to current events, etc.
10. Teach your students how to participate. Many of them may have had little or no experience with small group discussion, and most of those who have experience have never been taught how to do it well. Set some ground rules and behavior expectations during your time.

11. Ease students into discussion. One tactic is to engage the students to arrive in "chit chat" about the weather, a recent sports event, something in the news, summer activities, etc. The point is to get students comfortable and talking so that as you ease them into the subject for the day, you are not making a sudden demand for performance.

12. Make certain each student has an opportunity to talk. The longer a student goes without talking, the more difficult it will become.

13. Don't forget non-verbal communication. Smiling and nodding are great! Look at the student who is speaking to show that you are listening and appreciate his or her contribution. Sit upright and a bit forward to show your interest and anticipation. And watch for non-verbal cues form your students as well. If they look bored, sleepy, disinterested, then it may be time to change tactics, stand and stretch, move on to another topic, etc.

14. Be careful not to get into private conversations with one or two students that might exclude the rest of the group.