



How do we begin to establish community rules?

Begin with your leadership team and/or your youth ministry council. Talk about why you need community rules and what those rules might look like. Most rules of conduct are written while planning for a trip away from the church: How are youth—and adults—expected to behave away from home? Most rules are described as covenants of conduct, agreements that all participants are expected to sign and live up to. What should be included in covenants of conduct? As a minimum, you should include expectations about behavior: smoking, alcohol, drugs, inappropriate sexual behavior, and so forth. Be clear about what the expectation is. If you mean absolutely no smoking, you should say so. Remind adults that they will be held to the same set of expectations. Spell out the consequences of violating the covenant.

Then write up your covenant of conduct in a systematic form. Provide space for youth to sign, indicating that they have read the covenant and agree to abide by it. Also provide a space for parents to sign, indicating that they have read the covenant, support it, and will support you if you have to invoke consequences on their child. Adult counselors and other volunteers should also sign the covenant, indicating that they will abide by it.



What are some guidelines for enforcing a covenant of conduct? How do we handle a youth who will not honor the commitments made to the group?

Guidelines should be written into the covenant, spelled out clearly and in detail. For example, any indication of drug use will result in the person being sent home on the first available transportation, at the parent's expense. Be sure youth understand the covenant and know you are serious about the consequences. Then you have to carry through. The hard part will be when a person violates the covenant and you want to show grace and forgiveness by giving a second chance. If the covenant says zero tolerance, then the only way to show grace is to enforce the consequences. To take a minor example, we were on a conference mission tour when one of the youth began having serious medical problems. A trip to the doctor revealed that she had not told us everything she should have on the medical forms submitted with the application for the trip. This could have been life-threatening. She was not supposed to lift anything, but she had been helping with a service project. I told her that if she lifted anything heavier than her plate the rest of the trip, she would be on the first train home. She lived up to that commitment and expectation, and the rest of the group was willing to help carry her suitcase. A more serious example is the youth director who had two busloads of senior highs on the way to a ski trip when he discovered a youth smoking marijuana. The youth director called the youth's parents, told them the youth would be on such-and-such a flight, and they should plan to meet the flight. They were told why the youth was coming home, and they agreed that the youth director had made the right decision. Other youth leaders who were in a work camp or retreat setting closer to home have called parents to come get youth who were being disruptive and/or violating the covenant.



At what point do we turn on the tough love?

The short form of the answer is, You turn on the tough love whenever

- the covenant is violated,
- youth need to be protected,
- adults need to be protected.



How do we deal with youth who provoke the question, Why are you here?

A teacher took over a senior high Sunday school class where the youth were anything but cooperative or interested. After about three months, the teacher discovered that the youth were pleased that they had run off teachers each of the past five years. That teacher handled the situation by ignoring the fact that the class did not want her and was trying to run her off. She kept right on teaching. That was tough to do some Sundays because the group refused to discuss anything. But she continued to be there, continued to like the youth, and continued to try to draw them out. It was a rough year, but some of those youth later apologized and became strong leaders of the class the next year.

That is the only way I know for dealing with youth like that. Whether it is one person or an entire class, ignore the fact that they do not want you. Keep on teaching and trying to draw them out. And never stop loving them. Hey, nobody said it was easy.



What do we say to youth who stay away because other youth are so disruptive?

And, of course, the youth who stay away are the ones you most want in your group. If it is a fellowship group, this may be the time to organize a separate Bible study or covenant group—by invitation only. This will allow you to work with the youth who are serious about learning and growing in faith on a deeper level. It will also allow you to continue working with the disruptive youth in the fellowship setting, gently leading them to want to grow in faith.

If the situation is a Sunday school class, ask the youth who are staying away if they would be willing to come back and help you rebuild the group on a more solid basis. Commit to cracking down on the disruptions. Some youth who are staying away will be more willing to come back if they see you are making an effort to deal with disruptive youth.

In every case, let youth who are staying away know that you understand the problem. Invite them to help you think about ways in which you could help them grow in faith in another setting. Or invite them to help you deal with the problem directly. Positive peer pressure can be an important factor in dealing with disruptions.



How do we reach youth who are more focused on entertaining their peers than on what is happening in the class/fellowship group?

The question assumes that you want to reach (engage) these youth, rather than just control them. Here are some suggestions that might work singly or in combination. Go out of your way to relate to these youth outside the group. Find out *why* they are focused the way they are. They may have some serious issues (such as not feeling loved, feeling no one cares, feeling excluded) that explain their behavior and that you can address as a significant part of your ministry.

If there are no issues beyond entertainment, then you are probably dealing with a problem of lack of maturity. In this case, turn the tables on them. Work hard to find some learning activities, such as roleplay, where these youth can be entertaining and still be a part of the learning process.

If all else fails, you may simply have to say, "I love you, but I won't tolerate that kind of behavior." Then make that stick. You cannot allow a handful of youth to destroy the group with their entertainment needs.



How do we maintain a semblance of order without yelling, threatening, or punishing?

One way is to simply ignore a certain amount of disorder.

After all, some disorder is nothing more than high-energy youth who are being asked to focus on one thing. Decide in advance how much disorder you will tolerate and what you will do when your point of no toleration has been reached.

So, what do you do when your point of no toleration has been reached? One strategy is to ask questions: Who can tell me what has happened in the past three minutes? Is what we're doing a way of showing love for one another? How would you feel if you were the leader of this group? This could lead to a healthy discussion, which would be a distraction from the point of the session; but, hey, you are already distracted. What do you have to lose?

A second strategy is to be silent. A respected youth leader can simply sit quietly, not doing anything but watching the group. In a few minutes, youth will begin to be uncomfortable with the silence and begin to quiet themselves down. Some youth will take leadership at this point and bring the group under control themselves. An alternative to silence is a few seconds of silence on your part, followed by your softly singing a song that

is a signal to quiet down and focus. You will usually not have to sing more than two choruses before the group catches on and begins to join in. When everyone is singing, you can return to the session.

A third strategy is called rebuke with affirmation: I love you, Jessica, but I won't tolerate that kind of behavior. Matt, I appreciate your enthusiasm for your school winning the big game, but we need to put that behind us for now. Sarah, you have a real gift for friendship, but we need to stop the side conversations.

Sometimes, of course, all other things fail, and we have to take action. I confess that I once expelled four junior high boys from youth group for a month because of their disruptive behavior. Fortunately, their parents backed me up, and those boys straightened out and became leaders in the group and my good friends.



How do we get their attention to start the meeting?

Well, you can always yell loud enough to be heard over the noise of the group. But that sets a tone for the meeting that suggests the loudest voice gets to set the agenda. I prefer a quieter approach. Whenever it is time to settle down, drop the conversations, and begin the meeting (or class), I sing "Sanctuary" as many times as I need to in order to get their attention. The first time I tried it, I had to sing the chorus four times. After a few weeks, the group was singing along before I reached the end the first time.

