

Chapter

5

Know Your Youth

The World Your Youth Live In

Just as there are no universal youth, there is no universal youth culture. If you want to know more about the world your youth live in, a bit of poking around will be necessary. Working through the following steps may be helpful as you sort out the particular culture of the youth you are serving or the youth you would like to reach.

Create an Age/Grade Timeline

Draw a single line and break it into segments that match the ages or grades of the youth you are working with: lowest on the left, highest on the right. On that line, place a mark for any and all major events your youth typically deal with, such as entering high school, getting a driver's license, and attending prom. Knowing what major changes and rites of passage your teens typically go and grow through will help you understand when they may need support and guidance. These also may be times when they are particularly open to suggestions and instruction.

Create a Weekly/Daily Timeline

Examine what goes on in a typical week of a teen in your area. If most ride a school bus, that's a good beginning point. If they have a strong soccer program with endless weekend tournaments, that's a consideration, as are all sports, athletics, fine arts, and any other components. When do they have free time, and where do they spend it? Review school times, eating times, family times, and recreation times. Your ministry must take place within the environment of their daily lives. It's difficult to plan ministry and reach real people when you can not foresee the rhythms of their weekly lives.

Review Family Matters

Families do matter! The impact families make, positively and negatively, in and on the lives of teens is well worth noting. Knowing more about the youths' families allows prayers and plans to be more specific and informed. Some things to know about each youth include:

- Who is in the immediate family?
- How many parents live in the household?
- What is the religious background of the family?
- Is the family a blended family?
- Are the parents supportive of the youth's involvement in church activities?

Review Media Influences

Youth today are bombarded by media of every type. What media most affect the teens you are concerned with? What magazines or books are they reading? What radio stations, cassette tapes, or compact discs are they listening to? What television shows are they watching, and what media do they discuss when they get together? Do they chat about daytime television or Internet sites? How do they connect with each other? Are they linked to each other by telephone, by e-mail, or by driving back and forth to each other's houses?

Review the Pressure Points

What forces shape and push at the lives and goals of teens in your area? Most youth experience a good deal of stress around the issue of grades on their schoolwork. This may be parental pressure, but it also may reflect a deeper concern about their future, such as qualifying for college, choosing a college, deciding on a career, and pondering what will be their overall effectiveness as an independent adult.

Review What Youth Revere

Some youth think the world begins and ends with sports; others focus on cars, jobs, parties, or friends. The list can include anything that is important to the youth in your area. It is important to realize that many youth value what is handed on to them by the traditions and attitudes of the community. Regardless of how or why, at least know what the areas of reverence are. For negative influences, these deeply rooted forces are to be reckoned tactfully, using grace and patience. Head-on attacks usually put people in a defensive posture and could end up reinforcing their positions, rather than causing them to think things through.

Review Their Heroes

Knowing who youth admire, venerate, and want to be like are all important things of which to be aware. Some follow their "guru" with outward and visible signs such as what they wear, how they act, and what they pay money for. Others are more subtle, showing few outward signs. Reaching teens who admire sports legends would be handled differently than reaching teens who look up to musicians. Even which musicians are being admired is important to know, as you may approach those who look up to a rock-and-roll singer differently than those who revere writers of Broadway music.

Review Your Alertness Aptitude

This may sound arduous, but give it consideration. Gather the adults in your church who work with the youth. Review the names of each youth in your ministry, one by one, asking this question, "Who in this room is alert for this teen?" This would mean noticing each teen's attendance or lack of it, lifting him or her up in prayer, perhaps making a phone call from time to time when appropriate. (Please note: This isn't authorization to shadow or fawn over a teen, nor should this be viewed as authority to counsel or to serve as a surrogate spiritual guide. This is merely a way of making sure that each youth has someone who is maintaining an awareness of that youth so that he or she doesn't fall through the cracks.)

Walking through these components should help you and others in youth ministry to be sensitive to the world in which your youth live their daily lives.

Nurturing the Whole Person

In seeking to minister to the whole person, strive to address these traditional domains: physical, spiritual, intellectual, emotional, and social. Here is a quick inventory:

- Physical: recreation, nourishment, haven, safety, and so forth.
- Spiritual: worship, prayer, time with God, stillness, and so forth.
- Intellectual: Bible study, training, discussion, exploration, and so forth.
- Emotional: honor, significance, belonging, respect, and so forth.
- Social: fun, friends, liveliness, play, mentors, and so forth.

How Do Youth Learn?

I have always loved crossword puzzles, so when I needed to come up with a creative Advent program, I knew just what to do. I was certain my youth would get excited about a big wall-sized crossword puzzle to be filled in with Advent and Christmas words. I spent hours creating clever clues with reasonable answers to acquaint my youth with the meaning of the season.

As the youth trickled into the youth room that night, I thought I was with a herd of groaning cows. I discovered almost none of my youth liked doing crosswords. That hour, one of the longest in my ministry, taught me that when youth have no interest, nothing is interesting.

Most people ask how to teach youth. I wish more folks asked how youth learn. It is a critical distinction. The first question focuses on what is going on with the leader, and too often planning stops there. For example, since I like crossword puzzles, I assumed my youth would like them; or if I had felt like being serious, I might have assumed everyone would enjoy a serious and deep program. The emphasis is on the wrong person—the teacher. The more appropriate approach is to begin with the hearer—the learner.

While focusing on the youth and the learning rather than on the adults and the teaching is the best way to start, it is only the beginning. Several issues come into play when we look into the learning process and what it means for youth ministry.

First, make sure you know what your goal for the session is. Knowing what you want the hearers to learn is critical to a successful encounter. What do you want to get across? Where do you want to end up?

Second, how can this idea be best communicated with your particular group? Think about the people in your group. Then think about possible methods of getting across the main idea. Decide which method(s) best communicates the goal.

People have specific ways they learn best. To maximize learning, vary teaching methods. One program might use music heavily; another might emphasize service work; and still another may stress debate and discussion. Better still, learning how to blend several techniques into the same session will communicate to a greater variety of youth.

Life Issues

Adolescence is a normal phase of life. Each youth will follow his or her own inner time schedule in the transition between childhood and young adulthood. Listed below are some of the developmental issues with which youth are dealing.

Developing Meaningful Relationships

Relationships are important to adolescents. In their efforts to be accepted, junior high or middle school students in particular dress, talk, act, and believe the way "everyone else" does within their circle of friends. It is important to model acceptance and openness. Youth need to feel free to talk about their friendships. Adult leaders can help youth mix and mingle with group members by using deliberate icebreakers and by designing small-group tasks.

Younger teens search for a sense of identity within groups. Older youth begin to differentiate themselves from groups and to establish their own identity. Significant adult relationships provide role models for moral values, understanding, and behavior. Adolescents who do not have adult mentors may model themselves after peers that perpetuate immature, irrational, and unthinking behavior.

Dealing With Sexual Feelings

Early adolescents have an awakening of sexual feelings. Television, movies, music, and advertising bombard them with messages about sexuality, often causing increased confusion. Ministry with youth and their parents should include sex education from the Christian perspective. With increasing numbers of adolescents engaging in sexual activity and with the high risks associated with sexual activity, it is imperative that teens be presented with a Christian understanding of sexuality.

Developing Self-Esteem

Youth are inwardly focused (how they look and how they think they look to others). They are aware of their differences in maturation and are sensitive to feelings concerning self-image that influence their self-worth. Include games, relational activities, and topics that promote cooperation and affirmation, rather than the all-familiar competition and putdowns present elsewhere in our society. Leaders also should be sensitive to games and activities that are difficult for the overweight or otherwise challenged youth.

Teens struggle to understand and to know what their feelings mean. They struggle to control their feelings in a socially acceptable way. Help youth deal with stress, depression, and tension in their lives by using patience, by providing positive activities (singing, games/community building, and service to others), by loving them, and by accepting them.

Racism is a reality for many ethnic youths. It can have a negative impact upon their outlook on life, self-concept, and self-esteem. All youth work to discover "who they are." For ethnic youth in particular it may be important to claim and affirm their ethnic heritage. Be sensitive to the unique experiences of ethnic and cultural groups. All cultural groups bring richness to the larger culture and should be treated with dignity and respect.

Developing Personal Ethics and Moral Values

Adolescents are developing critical thinking, decision-making, and problem-solving skills. Newly able to think about their future and the kind of society in which they want to live, they begin to struggle with abstract principles and ideals such as liberty, justice, and love. Parents and adult workers with youths often get the full-force dosage of adolescent unlimited and untested "think" power. They are passionate with unbridled idealism about the world. Provide a safe place for youth to express their visions, and provide opportunities for youth to act on their beliefs. Help intellectual growth by providing interesting and challenging experiences where youth can learn firsthand about limits. This in turn helps prepare them to make better choices.

As young adolescents begin to think abstractly, they are able to imagine what others are thinking about them. This leads to the peer group becoming increasingly important and authoritative. Personal conflicts arise when the church differs from the peer group. Youth usually will go along with the peer group at this point. Be informed enough to talk about conflicting moral issues when the opportunities arise. Provide "safe zones" (nonjudgmental, non-threatening) where honest, genuine discussions dealing with moral issues can occur. Direct youth to Scriptures for help. Provide a listening ear and loving direction while being willing to let them struggle for their own answers. Young people must be allowed the opportunity to change their minds about previously stated opinions. Teach empathy and compassion for and about each other. It's important to find ways to affirm, listen, love, and care for them.

Our faith connects with everything we do—each struggle and each success. A nurturing church provides a sense of safety and support as individuals grow in their faith. Caring adults—Sunday school teachers and other adult workers with youth—offer timely experiences and activities that encourage decision-making, guide youth through developmental transitions, and always make sure they are aware of God's love and care for them.

Youth With Disabilities

Youth ministry is meant to be inclusive—all youth feeling safe, accepted, included, and loved. We must strive to create environments that emphasize unity and community, highlight the wonder and awe of diversity, and yet discover the wonder of oneness in Christ. Youth with physical or other types of disabilities may need particular help to fully participate in the youth ministry of your congregation. These disabilities may include things such as attention deficit disorder, autism, dyslexia, learning disabilities, hearing impairment, visual impairment, and restricted movement.

Learn as much as you can about the types of disabilities found in the youth you work with. Teachers, parents, and the youth themselves can provide suggestions of what will make the youth ministry more accessible for the youth with disabilities.

It is important to understand disabilities and to work at being both accessible and inclusive. Crucial to this whole process, however, must be affirmation and unconditional love and acceptance. The variety of our abilities and our limitations is a mark of God's fingerprint on our individuality. In all your plans, all your language, and all your work at hospitality, highlight the deeper fundamental knowledge that God is a God of grace and has given us talents, gifts, and insights to share.

Differences Among Youth

We must guard against easy generalizations about youth. Young people are individuals with unique combinations of interests, abilities, needs, backgrounds, experiences, doubts, and dreams. Helping youth affirm their unique identities is a crucial part of being in ministry with them.

Be sensitive to differences that are products of ethnic and cultural diversity. These areas reflect different experiences that, when appreciated and understood, can greatly enrich shared group life. Prayerfully monitor

your sensitivity to avoid being influenced by patronizing attitudes, self-righteous behavior, or veiled hostility.

Different interest orientations are always present in a group. Different interests can be related to school activities, attendance at different schools, hobbies, skills, varying degrees of ability, and different family backgrounds. Many of these differences should be celebrated in their own right and have potential strengths to build on in the group.

For More Help

The Search Institute is committed to practical research benefiting children and youth. Their website is www.search-institute.org.

The National Middle School Association is an organization for those interested in the educational and developmental needs of young adolescents. Their website is www.nmsa.org.