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Ways to Build Strength Caring for Youth

Honor the Spirituality of Youth

- Appreciate and validate youth as persons of sacred worth with legitimate spiritual needs and responses.
- Understand young persons as participants in ministry, not objects of ministry.
- Shake off stereotypes of youth as irreligious, rebellious and difficult.
- Don't make young people be like you before they can be like Jesus.
- Don't guess at young people's needs. Solicit input and feedback from teens themselves, not just parents and adults leaders. Invite them to suggest ways the church can help them grow in faith.
- Appreciate that youth ministry is more than youth group.
- Advocate for youth.

Equip Parents to Nurture their Children's Faith

- Know that parental influence is the primary factor determining the religious commitment of youth, even for older teens.
- Support faith formation in the parents of youth. Getting parents involved and serious about their own faith is the best way to get youth involved and serious.
- Start a study group for parents of teens aimed at helping them understand how to nurture their teenagers' spirituality.
- Provide resources for practicing and discussing faith at home -- for praying together as a family, for observing Christian holidays, and conversing about faith issues.
- Consider an intergenerational format for Christian education that has children and parents in study together.
- Provide support groups and resources on child-raising issues.
- Teach parents the importance of just hanging out with their kids.

"Get Real" with Christian Education for Youth

- Ask if your youth Sunday School curriculum is seriously addressing the questions kids are really asking.
- Honestly address issues related to sexuality. Offer a first-rate program on human sexuality that parents would want to send their kids to.



- Recognize that discussion and conversation are essential to faith formation.
- Use current events as discussion topics.
- Give teens permission to ask questions and talk about their doubts.
- Empower youth to rewrite hymns and prayers in ways that are meaningful to them.
- Get acquainted with the music kids spend their time listening to. Help youth make connections between their music and faith. Allow them to find their voice and worship God in their own musical languages and styles.
- Articulate the basic tenets of the faith clearly and often.
- Emphasize experience-centered learning. Faith must be experienced before it can be articulated. Experience is often more important than information about faith.
- Provide training in spiritual disciplines – prayer, Scripture reading, acts of mercy. Emphasize the practice of faith.
- Integrate “service learning” into Christian education to teach discipleship.

Provide Excellent Adult Leadership for Youth Activities

- Recruit adult leaders for youth activities who are knowledgeable, committed, spiritually mature, and effective in communicating with young people. Don’t assume that a young adult is necessarily best suited for the job.
- Provide training for youth teachers and leaders, especially on discussion and listening skills.
- Perform required background checks for volunteers and staff working with youth. Implement policies and procedure to prevent child abuse.

Make Worship Meaningful for Young Persons

- Give youth meaningful and visible roles as worship participants.
- Make youth worship experience-based. The elements of worship should all connect to a central message that causes the worshiper to make a connection with God.
- Use popular songs, movie clips, or poems to connect the message with the broader culture.
- Have youth write their own liturgies and prayers.

Create a Sense of Belonging for Youth

- Youth ministry is about relationships. Relationships are more important than programs. Young persons are seeking a sense of belonging.
- Strive to integrate youth into the church as a whole. Youth programs should equip and empower youth as congregational participants, not isolate or “ghettoize” them.
- Be present for kids. Listen.
- Kids need and value stability, routines, and ritual, even if they don’t act like it.
- Combat cliquishness. Reinforce inclusiveness and acceptance of peers.
- Build group cohesiveness with retreats and mission trips providing opportunities for sustained interaction.



Cultivate Competence in Youth

- Build a sense of accomplishment among young persons with challenging music, drama, or service activities. The ability to develop “competence” is one of the hooks connecting kids to church.
- Give youth real responsibilities.
- Extend leadership opportunities to as many youth as possible. Give them an active role in the leadership and decision making of the church.
- Start a youth led worship service.

Strive for Effective Youth Fellowship

- Be consistent with your meeting times and place. Meeting at the church is often preferable to meeting in different homes because it is a well-known location and “neutral” territory.
- Divide junior high and senior high youth if possible. Older teens will tend to fall way from groups with many younger kids.
- Involve the youth in planning all their activities.
- Balance recreation, study, devotion and fellowship.
- Schedule a “big event” every month to make it easy for youth to invite their friends.
- Enlist parents as allies. Their support is critical.
- Have clear policies about behavioral boundaries and discipline policies.



Some Additional Resources

- Bass, Dorothy C. and Don C. Richter. *Way to Live: Christian Practices for Teens*. Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2002.
- Borgman, Dean. *When Kumbaya is not Enough: A Practical Theology for Youth Ministry*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1997.
- Burkett, David Miles. *Let's Talk About It: How to Lead Discussions with Youth*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997.
- Dean, Kenda Creasy and Ron Foster. *The Godbearing Life: The Art of Soul Tending for Youth Ministry*. Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1998.
- Dean, Kendra Creasy. *Practicing Passion: Youth and the Quest for a Passionate Church*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2004.
- Delia Halverson. *Side by Side: Families Learning and Living the Faith Together*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002.
- Huber, Jeff and Tami Bradshaw. *Youth in Charge: How to Develop Youth Leadership*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997.
- Jones, Tony. *Postmodern Youth Ministry*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001.
- Lytch, Carol. *Choosing Church: What Makes a Difference for Teens*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004.
- Miller, Craig Kennet and MaryJane Pierce Norton. *Make God Read for a New Generation: Ministry with Millennials Born from 1982 to 1999*. Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2003.
- Norton, MaryJane Pierce, et. al. FaithHome. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002.
- Olson, Ginny, Dianne Elliot and Mike Work. *Youth Ministry Management Tools*. Zondervan, 2001.
- Senter, Mark H., ed. *Four Views of Youth Ministry*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001.
- Smith, Christian. *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Wimberly, Anne E. Streaty. *Keep it Real: Working with Today's Black Youth*. Nashville: Abingdon, 2005.
- For additional resources and to subscribe to the Lewis Center's free biweekly online newsletter, *Leading Ideas*, go to <http://www.churchleadership.com>.

