

BUILDING COMMUNITY

What makes good youth groups? Good relationships!

Thriving youth groups build each individual's self-esteem and create a warm, open, accepting atmosphere. Group members feel good about each other and like to be together. That is God's plan for the church. Good, strong relationships in youth groups don't just happen. A perceptive leader plans the building of relationships as a continuous part of youth ministry programming.

Check on yourself. See how many of these friendship-building ideas you already incorporate into your youth ministry. Then see how many you can add! Let these ideas provide building material for a stronger youth group.

- Plan detailed publicity. Include place. date. time. topic. cost. Add fun "extras" that say "You won't want to miss this!"
- Make sure everyone has a ride to the meeting. Providing transportation shows added concern: You're willing to go the extra mile to get kids there.
- Be at the meeting early so young people's first impression isn't a locked door. Caring enough to be on time means the youth group members are important.
- Meet in a space that is inviting & conducive to building community (clean, good lighting, pleasant atmosphere).
- Play background music as the group members arrive. This helps build anticipation and says something's happening.
- If possible. place chairs in a circle rather than in rows. A circle creates equality among members.
- Give several kids special responsibilities such as greeters, huggers and minglers. Not only will they help welcome others. but they'll develop leadership skills.
- Supply name tags for the participants at each meeting. Even if everyone knows everyone, name tags are fun. Planning for name tags also says "We welcome new members and friends."
- Open your meeting with a name game, song or other type of get-acquainted activity, For example. ask everyone to find a partner he or she doesn't know well. Give each pair three minutes to interview each other for facts such as name, favorite hobby, favorite memory, most embarrassing moment. Call time and gather the group members in a circle. Go around the circle and have each person introduce his or her partner and share the interesting facts.
- Use the students' names throughout the meeting. Remembering names and using them tells members they're valuable.
- If you sing songs use song sheets, books or overhead projector so everyone will know the words. A sure-fire way of making a new person uncomfortable is singing "in" songs even body else knows.
- Plan at least one part of the meeting format that you repeat each time. For example: open with a song, play a name game, have Bible study, lead an affirmation activity, close with a prayer and refreshments. Ritual, sprinkled with a few surprises now and then, builds group identity.
- Plan for the loner. Ask someone to be the "watchdog." For example if one kid is left out when you pair up for activities, the watchdog immediately welcomes the loner as his or her partner. Something as simple as this creates a sense of belonging- for even the loner
- Plan for touching. You can plan a game such as "hug tag," a group hug or a circle prayer. Also a leader giving pats on the back tells a young person "You're special!"
- Use small groups. Six to eight people is ideal for encouraging group dynamics- everyone has a chance to share
- Make sure nobody leaves the meeting without interacting with someone. Creative program planning ensures one-on-one, small group and large group interaction.
- Plan for mixing. Make sure the same persons aren't partners for the entire meeting. For example, for one activity, say "Find a partner with eyes the same color as yours." For a second activity, say "Find a partner who was born in the same month as you." Gently break tight cliques; help kids build relationships with lots of other friends.

- Begin with easy and light meeting elements, then progress to the more serious or heavy activities. Give kids a chance to get rid of their barriers slowly. Don't expect kids to share their deepest concerns before you establish a bond of trust.
- Plan for support. When you give young people responsibility, don't abandon them. Make sure they know you're there as a backup. For example, call kids prior to the meeting to remind them of duties and to see whether they need your help.
- Avoid putdown games that make kids the brunt of a joke or games that change rules without a person's knowledge. Making fun of someone doesn't build self-esteem
- Play games & activities that build self-esteem. Here's an idea: Give each person a crayon. Tape a piece of paper to everyone's back. Allow the group members 10 minutes to write positive comments on each person's piece of paper. After the activity, have each participant read his or her comments. Encourage kids to post their papers in a prominent place at home as a daily reminder of their worth.
- Close with prayer. Ask young people to hold hands in a close circle. Use prayer ideas such as giving thanks for the person on your right, listing special concerns, praying for people who aren't at the meeting. Group members who pray together share a special bond.
- Ask participants to each hug at least three people before they leave the meeting.
- Have a group hug. Form the closing circle by placing arms on shoulders of persons on either side. Give the signal for everyone to take one step forward at the same time.
- Use a unison benediction. For example, say together, "The Lord bless you and keep you. . ." or God is Good;..
- Give each person the name of a youth group member to pray for during the week ahead. Include guests.
- Assign each person a "special friend." During the next week have young people do at least one anonymous fun thing for the special friend. They can send a card, have a friend deliver a flower, send a coupon for one free ice cream cone or tape a "thought for the day" to the friend's school locker.
- Enjoy refreshments. Assign different kids to be in charge each week. Eating together is a natural community builder. Even Jesus thought it was a good idea!
- Call people who are absent. Make a friendly telephone call that says " You're important to the group and we miss you."
- Link a youth group member with a young adult or elderly person. Encourage the kids and adults to pray for each other, call each other and get together for dinner or a movie. Even if a teenager isn't into the "youth group," the church can provide avenues for positive, one-on-one adult youth relationships.
- Take a survey. Research youth group needs. ask the members what they want for programs. Asking for needs gives value to each person's contribution to the group.
- Involve as many kids as possible in planning. The more the kids are involved, the more ownership they'll have. And ownership builds a sense of community.
- Make a complete list of all youth group members, including inactives and friends. Check addresses and phone numbers. The list will ensure that all members and potential members receive mailings and phone calls.
- Watch the local and school newspapers for announcements, activities and honors that mention your group members. Clip and mail the special articles to them. Visit schools and attend special events. Keeping up with kids' activities outside of church says you care about all parts of their lives.
- Remember each person's birthday. Send a birthday card, give a surprise party at church, or have the youth group surprise the birthday person with breakfast in bed! Celebrating special days helps create a sense of family.
- Use "care cards" at the church or during retreats. Give each person a Manila envelope to decorate with his or her name. Then post the envelopes in a prominent place. Encourage kids to write positive comments, words of appreciation or thanks on 3x5 cards and place them in the envelopes.
- Take advantage of school holidays; plan activities accordingly.

- Encourage all types of caring adults to be involved with the youth group. Different kids relate better with different adult styles.
- Keep in touch with occasional post cards. Express thoughts such as, "Missed you last week." Or, "Thanks for all your help at last night's meeting. I enjoy your enthusiasm."