

Your first meeting with your new group is winding down, and you decide to close with a Schwarzkopf-esque clincher: "I want you to know that I really care about you."

Kids who were placid just moments before suddenly erupt. A girl in the third row begins to sob. Angry faces surround you. It's clear you've inadvertently stepped on an emotional land mine.

Finally, a guy in the back breaks the tension: "Yeah, right! That's what our last youth director said—just before he quit. Care about us? You don't even know us!"

Touché. Your bluff's been called. It's "put up or shut up" time. And here are 55 ways to "put up."

1. Remember names. Few things leave a more lasting impression on kids than your ability to call them by name!

2. Meet at kids' level. Position yourself to communicate at eye level. Also take care that your vocabulary is easily understood by your teenagers.

3. Send birthday cards. Who do young people get cards from? Immediate family, extended relatives and close friends



Why not add your name to that list?

4. Invite them along. "Never go anywhere alone," advises youth ministry consultant Les Christie. Asking someone to join you confirms their worth to you. And it's a great chance to share informally and to role model the Christian life.

5. Be in touch. How many kids suffered through another week with-

out positive physical contact? Expressions as simple as a hand on the shoulder or a "holy hug" can prove your concern.

6. Respond to absences. Many young people drop out when they feel unneeded or unimportant. When you follow up with them, it communicates their value to you and the group.

7. Forgive and forget. "Love keeps no record of wrongs" (1 Corinthians 13:5). If you model authentic forgiveness it'll give your kids the courage to do the same.

8. Recognize accomplishments.

Look for opportunities to applaud your group members. Spread the word to family and friends that you want to know about this inside information.

9. Write encouraging notes. Kids love to get mail, so send them brief postcards or letters. Express your confidence in them and reaffirm your availability.

10. Offer support in a crisis. You're never more needed than when your teenagers face trouble. When kids face unexpected pregnancy, abuse, crime, death or rejection, your active concern can impact them for a lifetime.

11. Recognize personality changes. Abrupt shifts in normal behavior patterns may be signals for help. Don't hesitate to share your concerns.

12. Follow up prayer requests. Ask for progress reports on prayer concerns. This reminds your kids that you take their spiritual life seriously and helps them recognize God's provision.

13. Use the telephone. How often do you phone your teenagers for no reason? Call just to say "Hi!"

14. Go to their "natural habitat." Your presence on your group members' turf is significant. So go to school events or schedule a visit at their workplace.

15. Open your home. Occasionally ask kids to join you at home apart from regular group activities.

55 WAYS TO LOVE YOUR KIDS

It's not enough to tell your kids you care—
you've got to show them! **BY DICK GIBSON**



16. Confront in love. Authentic concern sometimes says, "I care for you too much to let that continue." Your willingness to deal with tough issues reveals the true nature of your commitment (Hebrews 12:5-11).

17. Listen. You don't need all the answers, just two good ears. Empower your teenagers to talk through their problems with someone they can trust.

18. Answer questions. Young people have difficulty interpreting the mixed messages they receive. If they ask, it's because they trust you. Don't be afraid to respond honestly, even in sensitive areas.

19. Say "I Love You!" These words can never be said too often. Say them personally, sincerely and individually.

20. Affirm spiritual growth. Everyone can use a spiritual "pat on the back." Commend godly character you observe.

21. "Unwrap" kids' giftedness. When you detect latent talents or abilities in your kids, give them the encouragement and opportunity to explore those gifts.

22. Expect the best. Young people will settle to your level of expectation—so aim high.

23. Accept them as they are. Teenagers are in transition from childhood to adulthood, and they can act like either at any moment. Be patient, God's not finished with them (or you, for that matter).

24. Focus on their interests. Investigate your group members' hobbies and ask for pointers. They'll be happy to oblige, and you'll gain new insights into them.

25. Be available. Inform your group that you're accessible when they need you (remember to tell them when you're not available, too). You have lost an opportunity if they weather their storms alone.

26. Laugh together. Don't be so serious that you miss humorous moments.

27. Cultivate kids' opinions. Invite honest feedback and keep an open mind. God may want your young people to teach you something.

28. Be real. Your teenagers hunger for relationships with people who have the confidence to be themselves.

29. Be a "soft touch." When you

can, participate in your kids' fund-raisers. To avoid poverty, I purchase from *only* the first group member who asks me to.

30. Speak first. Initiating conversation can be difficult for shy or new group members. Make them feel important by speaking to them first.

31. Give positive reinforcement. Some young people are lightning rods for criticism. So look for something praiseworthy in every group member.

32. Keep confidences. Develop a reputation as someone who's reliable with confidential information. Nothing is more destructive to your credibility than breaking a trust.

33. Share "good news"! When group members make the news, mail them the clippings. Even if their parents already have a supply for the relatives, they'll appreciate your thoughtfulness.

34. Seek sanctuary. Your meetings should not be a battleground for personal disputes. Place a high priority on emotional security and acceptance for everyone.

35. Be dependable. How's your track record for consistency? If you're reliable in the small things you'll be rewarded with greater confidence (Matthew 25:14-28).

36. Be a servant. Greatness, as Jesus demonstrated, is expressed through service. Your group will reflect this truth to the extent they observe it in you (Matthew 10:24-25).

37. Send postcards. When you travel, mail postcards about your experiences to your group members. Let them know that even though you're away, they're still on your mind.

38. Smile. Your smile expresses openness and approachability.

39. Watch your tone of voice. Clear communication is made up of the words we choose and how we express them. Take care that your tone reflects concern and support.

40. Be attentive. It's frustrating to talk with someone whose actions demonstrate they're not interested. Make sure your body language reflects concern.

41. Support through prayer. Select two or three group members to pray for every week. Inform them in advance and ask for special needs or requests.

42. Maintain eye contact. The eyes

are a window to the soul. So let your kids see your compassion in your eyes.

43. Watch your words. Real affection is often exercised through what we determine not to say. Your careless remarks could leave lasting scars.

44. Post kids' pictures. Ask each group member for a school photo. Exhibit these photos in a high-profile place.

45. Give kids respect. This is a "boomerang principle"—give and you will receive in return.

46. Take them seriously. Any problem, no matter how trivial it may seem to you, is your kids' biggest concern at the moment. Don't brush it off.

47. Admit your mistakes. Don't be

fooled. We're usually the last to acknowledge what others already know.

48. Avoid church/school conflicts. Arbitrary scheduling that forces kids to choose between church and school activities is unfair.

49. Foster teamwork. Although your role will always involve overseeing the tasks at hand, don't lose touch with the crew. Serving together in the trenches builds camaraderie.

50. Invest your time in them. There's no substitute for just being together. This life-to-life interaction is the essence of discipleship.

51. Smooth "rough" edges. Do you have kids who lack social graces or need help with personal hygiene? It's awkward, but that's what friends are for.

52. Visit them at home. A young person's room is his or her corner of the world and your turnstile to it. Make an appointment and ask for a "guided tour."

53. Empathize. Empathy is "feeling your pain in my heart." Isn't this how Jesus expressed his love for us? (Philippians 2:6-7) Remember what it was like to be a kid.

54. Play together. If your teenagers would rather watch than participate, help them rediscover the joy of play. Choose activities that stress total group participation.

55. Resist favoritism. If pressed, you'd admit feeling "closer" to some kids than others. Budget your time and attention to everyone equally. ☐

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