

6 things you can do to banish put-downs, cutting remarks, shunning, & outright abuse from your group.

We've been taught a lie all our lives that sticks and stones will break our bones, but words will never hurt. Hurtful words are darts that lodge in a person's soul. For many kids, school is an extended-length episode of *Survivor*. The best many of them can do is cram in some learning as they run the daily gauntlet of put-downs, taunting, and abuse. Now, you'd think that a youth group would offer these beleaguered kids a safe haven from their daily struggles against bullying. Sadly, not so.

The "dirty little secret" in youth ministry is that we're never a fail-safe haven from the culture and its problems. Many of us are blind to rude and bullying behavior in our own groups. We're immersed in the culture too that is often cruel and mean-spirited. Every day in the United States more than 160,000 bullied children purposely skip school because they're afraid. Up to 30 percent of 6th to 10th graders are involved in school bullying (either as victim or perpetrator), with the highest frequency among 6-8th graders.

Boys are more likely to be both victim and bully.

A 12 years old boy killed himself. He left a note that they read to the school, " 'I killed myself because no one says hello to me, so no one will miss me.' " All he wanted was for someone to say hello to him. It's not rocket science. It's so simple, but so many people don't do it.

what's behind all the bullying?

Middle school students don't know how to make their shunning a subtle strategy like high school students. It's more of an

ostracizing. Their brains are not engaged to what their mouths are saying. At this age they are so self-absorbed. The media has really pushed the cuts' and laughing at each other's expense.

Tools to help you evaluate your existing programs and teach your kids how to minister to hurting peers.

1. Cliques are the breeding ground.

There are far more cliques present in today's schools than there were a decade or two ago. Cliques now form around common interests more than status. And no matter how well you've fought to defuse the negative power of cliques in your group, you can be sure that some young people in your area are staying away from your youth group because they're afraid they won't fit in. Cliques thrive because they offer acceptance, protection, and security- they promise kids they'll never be left alone or unappreciated. Many students view cliques positively, defining their clique as "my best friends." If you have tight-knit subgroups in your ministry, the message outsiders can hear is clear-"You're not welcome here"- and that will cripple your effectiveness. It's not just *what* the cliques are communicating, it's *what they're not* communicating. Most of what we see is more related to shunning and cliques, and even that is not as open and overt but is subtler. Especially with high school students, it's less bullying and name-calling and more social exclusion.

2. School rivalries can add to the fire.

Kids from competing schools can undermine community in your group by avoiding their rivals, using playful put-downs of others, and engaging in good-natured taunting if their school is the victor in a contest.

Make your ministry safe from bullying

Jesus commands us to "love your neighbor as yourself. Root out bullying behavior, confront it, then choke off the air it breathes.

1. Check your own behavior.

How did you interact with your kids and other adult leaders? Did you gravitate to only the popular kids, or did you spend time with those who unnerve or irritate you? The more inclusive you are to those marginalized kids in your ministry, the more you communicate "this group is for everyone." Compliment them openly, and ask them to do ministry tasks.

2. Make sure your kids are Body conscious.

In an ideal community, students feel loved and cared for. They know it's safe to share their deepest sorrows and fears. Inside they say, "I'm glad I'm here because I'm important to God." How to change the heart issues and character of my students? Really teach what it means to be a part of the body of Christ. "I belong to you. You belong to me. Together we make up the body of Christ" Teach them that a rational person doesn't mutilate himself by cutting off his foot or hand. When you speak unkindly to each other, you're cutting your arm off or you're poking your eyes out.

You can use the films Shallow Hal and A Walk to Remember as great discussion starters on judging others based on outward appearances.

3. Train your teen & adult leaders to spot and reach out to outsider kids.

Modeling by leaders and group members is key to developing a spirit of safety and trust in your group. Rely on student leaders to look for students that are excluded and shunned and left out by cliques. Step in personally and try to connect students that feel left out. Train and encourage adult leaders to step in and be a part of dealing with this type of behavior. Put the students in mixed groups- not divided by schools.

4. Build affirmation into your group.

Use creative community-building activities to give your teenagers opportunities to affirm one another.

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Apply the Three Compliment Rule. When one student cuts another verbally, they 'owe' 3 compliments. The only guideline is that it can't be about that person's clothing, but about character. Students begin to 'police' each other on cuts. Have an Autograph Night once in awhile. Tape letterhead to everyone's backs, and that night everyone goes around to write words of encouragement to one another. Regularly do community-building activities. Put up a Board in the youth room- a permanent place for teenagers to "graffiti" words of encouragement or to record others' successes.

5. Avoid divisive programming.

Some activities actually encourage divisiveness. Why pit group members against one another on a weekly basis to see who wins a prize? Even crowd breakers can be divisive when competition is overemphasized. Instead, celebrate diversity. Give kids a breather by planning activities that focus on concerts, books, extreme sports, or the arts.

6. Teach kids how to be friends. Most students just don't know how to make friends. Teach them how to actively listen, affirm others' gifts, and look for opportunities to serve.