

reaching everyday outcasts

How to build a group environment that welcomes, nurtures, and challenges the "faceless fringe kids" in your community.

by scott larson

Editor's Note: *The startling common thread among the teenagers who've planned and carried out deadly assaults on their classmates over the last few years is that they've all been "average" kids who were force-fed a steady diet of bullying, taunting, and exclusion. They were everyday outcasts. And your community is full of everyday outcasts. The key question: Is your group the kind of place where outcasts can feel safe, nurtured, and challenged? Scott Larson can help you answer that question. . .*

The problem with so many young people growing up in our culture is that they lack both healthy adult relationships and healthy peer relationships. These kids are susceptible to three damaging trajectories. . .

1. They become loners who feel like they don't fit in anywhere. As

one young man so pointedly said to me, "To be an outcast is to be a 'nonperson.'"

2. They bond to negative peers who'll offer them what they crave—acceptance. Children who lack positive relationships with adults are prone to form destructive connections as they seek peers with similar problems. Luke Woodham, the 16-year-old who murdered three students in Pearl, Mississippi, told ABC News that he felt isolated and rejected in his community. Thus, he was easily drawn into a group of boys who were self-proclaimed Satanists.

3. They become prey for unhealthy adults with ulterior motives. Dangerous cults and groups that profit from the sexual exploitation of young people actively recruit outcasts

because they know how easily they can be enticed.

If you know teenagers who are hurtling along on one of these destructive trajectories, they're at great risk of inflicting harm on themselves or others. Void of healthy outside perspectives, their world is wrapped in the pain of the present. Unable to visualize how things could possibly change for the better, they feel trapped and hopeless.

are your kids fulfilling their calling?

While today's generation of young people seems more radically committed to Christ than others in recent history, many have not connected their vertical relationship with God to their horizontal relationships with one another.

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understanding isn't believing.
Seeing or feeling is believing.**

These connections don't always come naturally, especially when it means loving those who are not like them. Like adults, kids need to be trained to fulfill their calling as people who minister "to the least of these."

While adult intervention is the key to reaching traditional at-risk young people, peers are the keys to reaching ostracized and bullied kids. There are so many of these kids that there's no way your adult staffers can reach them all. And most of us don't have the same access to outcast kids as our teenagers do. Just as vicious peer-to-peer interactions can send ostracized kids over the edge, grace-full interactions can build a new sense of worth and self-respect in them.

One 17-year-old girl understood this reality and expressed it eloquently in a recent letter to the editor in *Newsweek* magazine:

"To all my fellow students who may be reading this: You could prevent another tragedy from happening in your own seemingly safe school. Say hello to the guy who sits alone in chemistry and never speaks. Invite someone who always sits by herself at lunch to sit with you.

"Think about what you are doing when you tease, laugh at, or exclude someone from something just because he doesn't fit in. This may not solve the problem; some people are just not mentally stable. But if the youth in our schools make an effort to stop ostracizing such students, schools might become safer places. Maybe even happier, too."

how kids know when they belong

All kids long for a place to belong. And they know whether



or not they're welcome the moment they set foot in your youth group.

1. Kids know they're welcome if a peer invites them to come. I remember well what life in the eighth grade was like. By then I'd developed an ulcer because of excessive worry, anxiety, and a major inferiority complex. When it came to peers, I just didn't feel like I fit in. I struggled with depression and occasional thoughts of suicide. I was very vulnerable at this point and could have gone in any number of directions, depending on who reached out to me first.

My parents were very concerned about me. So they decided I should attend a local Youth for Christ club. I resisted because I didn't know anybody there.

"You'll meet people once you get there," my mother assured me. "These are Christian kids. They'll make you feel welcome." I wasn't so convinced.

My mother dropped me off and went to the library, promising to pick me up promptly at 9 p.m. When I looked in the window and came to the terrifying conclusion that I didn't know a soul there, I actually made it to the library ahead of my mom. She demanded that I go back, but I refused. I would have opted for a torture chamber before walking into a strange group of kids where every eye would be focused on me. Try as she did to convince me other-

wise, I went home with her.

What happened in the weeks that followed baffles me to this day. I'm not sure if it was the result of my parents' fervent prayers or if they took a more active approach. Jim, a kid I sat next to in fourth period, invited me to a Youth for Christ meeting. What my mother could not accomplish through reasoning, coercion, or manipulation, Jim achieved in less than five minutes. I attended that very week.

2. Kids know they're welcome when others in the youth group embrace them.

When a young person who's ignored and excluded nearly every day at school suddenly feels welcome in a youth group, it's a powerful thing. The reason so many of these struggling kids have negative friends is simple: Bad influencers were the first to reach out and embrace them.

When I first attended that YFC meeting, I knew no one. Jim quickly introduced me to one or two of his friends, and I soon felt welcome. When I left that first night, I knew I'd found a place to belong. It had nothing to do with spiritual convictions or a longing to grow in my faith; I simply felt welcome and accepted. The rest would come.

3. Kids feel

1 Slick programs can actually be counter-productive if they leave kids no room to offer their gifts and talents. You want a youth program that offers kids obvious, rewarding ways to contribute.

was frequently roughed up in the halls by other girls and called dirty names on a daily basis.

During that year she latched onto the gothic lifestyle as a way to deal with her increasing estrangement from peers. Her melancholy rapidly shifted to rage. She began to fight back when teased or ridiculed and frequently was sent to the principal's office.

Early in her ninth-grade year, she got into a knockdown, drag-out fight with four of her tormentors at a shopping mall. Her parents talked to school officials about the problem. Tabatha told her therapist that she was constantly afraid at school, had no friends, and was thoroughly miserable. "Maybe the world

would be better off without me," she concluded.

Not knowing what else to do, Tabatha's parents urged her to join a local youth group. They persuaded her that this would give her a chance to meet more positive young people.

"The church group was more depressing than school was because I expected more from it," said Tabatha. Her youth group peers also made fun of her appearance. Right in front of the youth director, teenagers leaned away from her and made faces, rolling their eyes whenever she ventured an opinion during Bible study.

"Knowing that even people who called themselves Christians

rejected me made me feel worse than ever²," said Tabatha. "But I suppose most of them weren't really there for God anyway. They were probably forced to attend, like me."

2. Use big events to introduce outcast kids to the group.

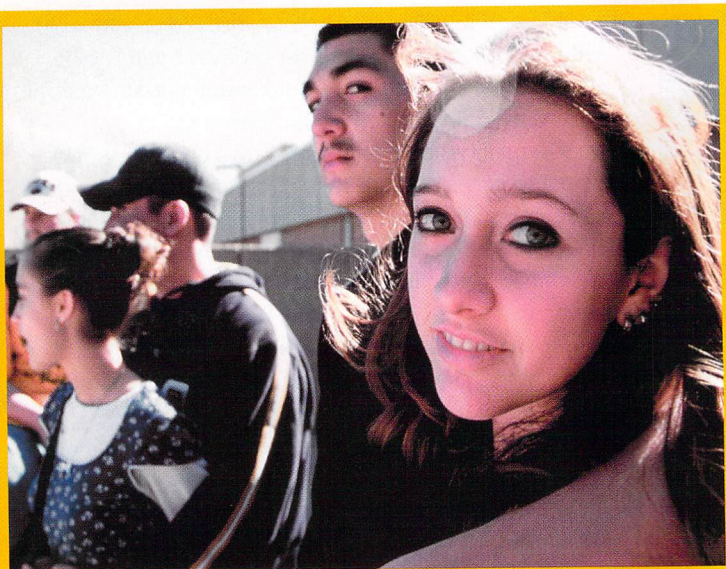
It can be intimidating for everyone involved when fringe kids are introduced into a youth group meeting. It's threatening for the youth group kids because outsiders are treading on their safe and predictable turf. And it's intimidating for the fringe kids because they can quickly discern when they're unwelcome.

Inviting new kids to special events³ allows both "insiders" and "outsiders" to come together on common ground and bond through their shared experience. Also, these activities typically offer an extended time for new relationships to form and deepen. When kids return to the regular youth group setting, they're maintaining momentum rather than trying to forge new relationships.

Events like these also give kids milestones they can look back on. In 1 Samuel 7:12, the prophet Samuel "took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen. He called it Ebenezer, saying, 'Thus far has the Lord helped us.' " Kids need at least a few "Ebenezers" to fully integrate into the group.

Dave was quiet, shy, overweight, and the butt of countless jokes. Away from the crowds, he had a keen sense of humor and was quite talented and creative.

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² Tabatha's story is strangely similar to Brian Warner's—better known as shock rocker Marilyn Manson. Warner grew up attending a Christian school in Canton, Ohio, where the teachers repeatedly warned students about the terrors of the Apocalypse and urged them to beware of the Anti-Christ. In his autobiography *The Long Hard Road Out of Hell*, Manson writes about the incident that fueled his over-the-top rebellion against God: "One day in fourth grade I brought in a picture that Grandma Wyer had taken on an airplane flight from West Virginia to Ohio, and in the photo there appeared to be an angel in the clouds. It was one of my favorite possessions, and I was excited to share it with my teachers because I still believed everything they taught me about heaven and wanted to show them that my grandmother had seen it. But they said it was a hoax, scolded me and sent me home for being blasphemous. It was my most honest attempt to fit in with their idea of Christianity, to prove my connection with their beliefs, and I was punished for it. It confirmed what I had already known from the beginning—that I wouldn't be saved like everybody else."

But few ever tasted these good things because he'd learned to survive by avoiding the spotlight. For Dave, attention was always closely linked to humiliation.

One of my staffers, John, led a group of kids including Dave on a mission trip to Jamaica a few years ago. "A whole new Dave emerged in Jamaica," recalls John. "Some of the groups that had arrived from different parts of the United States were having difficulty gelling. Dave arose as sort of the 'MC' of the whole group. Everyone saw him as the fun, caring kid with the Boston accent—not as the fat, quiet kid everyone made fun of. The transformation was incredible.

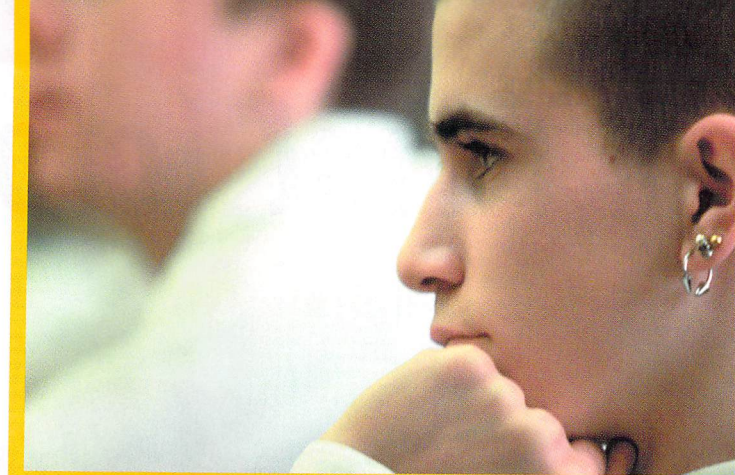
3 "Extreme activities"

such as rafting, ropes courses, caving, snowboarding, or service projects fit the bill well because they take kids into an alien environment and push them a little beyond their comfort zones. For example, mission trips level the playing field for everyone involved. I recall some of my mission-trip photos. In the departure photos, our hair was neatly arranged and our clothes spotless. We looked good, but our eyes always revealed a level of insecurity and self-absorption. What a difference when compared to photos shot toward the end of a trip. After days without showers, clean clothes, or hair dryers, our outward appearances weren't nearly so attractive, but our eyes looked altogether different. They sparkled. For many in the group, it was the first time they'd ever felt so needed or important.

"When Dave wasn't around, others would look for him. A hard worker and a soother of the hurting, he was also shedding the chains that had so tightly bound him. He even got up to participate in the talent show the last night.

"When we got back, everyone was amazed when Dave got up in front of the youth group to share his experiences. For the first time, they were laughing with him and not at him. He still got teased after that, but he was able to put up with it and to stick up for himself when he needed to. But he never retreated into his cocoon."

What fueled



Teenagers subconsciously decide whether or not they're welcome in a group by how they answer the question, "Can I possibly contribute something to this group?"

the change? Peer acceptance, important responsibilities, and a safe environment. And when others saw who he really was, instead of who he wasn't, they liked him. Outside the group's normal environment, other group members could see what was there all along.

3. Establish clear rules and boundaries at youth group events. Unclear expectations can derail fringe kids who are trying to integrate into the group. The regulars want things to stay as they've always been, but new kids have no idea what that means. They need to know the group's standards, and the "regulars" need to know bullying won't be tolerated.

One of the best bullying prevention techniques is to talk frankly with your kids. First, ask them to define what acts constitute bullying. As they come up with things such as gossiping, mocking, public humiliation, name-calling, dirty looks, and exclusion, ask how many have experienced these things in the past year. Then ask how big a problem they think bullying is in your youth group.

Once you all agree on the problem, invite suggestions about what the group can do to prevent these harmful acts in the future. As they take ownership in

both the problem and the solution, they'll be more committed to stopping harmful actions.

Mike, a local youth leader, told me how one of his kids, Brian, was always picking on younger, smaller kids in the group. Mike confronted Brian on numerous occasions, but nothing changed. He even spoke to Brian's parents and threatened to kick him out of the group.

When sign-up time came for the fall youth retreat, Brian's name was at the top of the list. "We can't let him go or I'll be chasing him all weekend," was Mike's first thought. But after praying about it, he didn't feel it would be right to ban Brian from the retreat. Instead, on the opening night, he clearly laid out the ground rules for the weekend, including mistreatment of others.

As Mike explained that everyone was responsible for the climate of the group, kids seemed to understand. He asked for their input on what behaviors constituted bullying and invited ideas on how it should be addressed. Later that evening, when Brian started picking on someone, his friends stepped in to confront him.

"You're turning my friends against me!" charged Brian, as he angrily confronted Mike later that evening. Mike again explained why his actions were

unacceptable and why nobody in the youth group would tolerate them. "If somebody picks on you, we would be there in your defense as well," he said.

The next evening, a frustrated Brian finally broke down in tears. He confessed that he'd been brutalized by an older brother all his life. He assumed bullying was the only way he could feel good about himself.

From time to time, Brian would sink back into old patterns, but each time his peers would either say something or simply give him a disapproving look. That was all it took for him to stop. The youth group helped Brian break a pattern he'd been entrenched in since childhood. Much to his surprise, the group didn't reject him for his actions, but embraced him through loving confrontation.

4. Create a Christ-encountering environment.

Kids need more than knowledge about God; they need to en-

counter him. When I was in high school, we spent lots of time studying apologetics. We knew that if our friends were going to seriously consider the claims of Christ, we had to present a logical argument for our faith.

For postmodern teenagers, however, understanding isn't believing. Seeing or feeling is believing. It's common to hear young people say things like: "It felt good here tonight. I'll be back."

Outcast kids are more aware of their deep needs than most. They're wounded, so they ask questions others don't consider until much later in life, including: "Is there really a God?" "What's the meaning of life?" and "Why am I here?" A searching attitude is a prerequisite to powerful encounters with Jesus. He was more interested in inviting the needy than in preaching to them: "If anyone is thirsty, let him [or her] come to me and drink" (John 7:37). Outcast kids are primed to respond to an invi-

tation from Jesus, and we should offer it to them.

5. Start early. Bullying behavior begins as soon as young people sense the differences between themselves and their peers. Older teenagers can have a huge impact on the bullying behavior of children. Because children look to teenagers to learn acceptable patterns of behavior, teenagers are in a unique position to give instruction, especially regarding respectful peer relationships.

Have your group members plan an anti-bullying presentation for the Sunday school classes (first through eighth grades) using skits, puppets, or stories. As your kids teach, they'll more deeply own their convictions. ■

Scott Larson is executive director of Straight Ahead Ministries, a comprehensive ministry to troubled kids, headquartered in Massachusetts. This article is adapted from his new book Risk in Our Midst: Empowering Teenagers to Love the Unlovable by Scott Larson, copyright © 2000, Group Publishing, Inc., P.O. Box 481, Loveland, CO 80539-0481.

the consumer youth group index

—by r. todd stiles—

Are we growing consumers or disciples?

We live in a seeker-sensitive Christian world that uses some of the tools of our consumer culture to reach and embrace people outside the church. As a strategy, it's produced both good and bad fruit. We're getting better at meeting people's needs, but meeting needs isn't the church's only mission.

Remember the scene in John 6:22-66? The multitude was following Christ for all the wrong reasons—they simply wanted more food. Jesus confronted these people by encouraging them to become disciples, not just attenders. He responded to the crowd with a challenge ("He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him") instead of giving the crowd what it wanted ("Here, have a little more food to eat").

I think our consumer-friendly attitude has produced a negative byproduct—we're so glad kids simply show up that we're afraid to ask them to grow up. That's why I developed a few diagnostic questions youth groups can use to determine their Consumer Youth Group Index.

1. Do my young people talk more about what they're getting from the group or what they're giving to it? Do your kids see themselves as the recipients of the mission or as the impetus behind it?

2. Which tone best resembles the comments I receive in evaluations: constructive criticism or critical complaining? Constructive criticism is aimed at increasing your impact; critical complaining is aimed at creating a more comfortable environment.

3. Do teenagers and parents see your ministry as a recreational tool to keep church kids busy, or as a mission designed to equip kids to reach a world that needs Christ's love?

Take the challenge—raise the bar on your expectations. From the multitudes, you'll siphon away disciples. From the disciples, you'll siphon away The Twelve. And The Twelve will turn the world upside down. ■

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