

CREATING A CLOSE-KNIT GROUP

continued

One bond-building exercise, Knots, puts your group in a bind. Since it's a high-energy activity, it requires time to cool down emotionally before you move on to your group meeting. It's not easy for junior highers to settle down after a

high-energy activity. So plan a transitional time such as singing, refreshments or a quiet game between Knots and your meeting.

Radioactive Swamp also makes your group work together.

KNOTS

TIME: 15 minutes.

MATERIALS: none.

DESCRIPTION

1. Ask the group members to form one or more circles, with no more than 15 kids in each.
2. Have each person stretch his or her right hand into the center of the circle and grab any hand (except for the person's next to him or her).
3. Have the participants repeat this process with the left hands. Make sure that no one is holding two hands of the same individual.
4. Once the group members are in this knot, tell them to untangle—without letting go of hands. It is legal to readjust a grip if an arm gets twisted, but the placement of that grip within the knot must remain the same.
5. To make the exercise more difficult, untangle without talking.

DISCUSSION

1. What's the purpose of this exercise?
2. What problems did you have getting untangled?
3. What was your level of participation?
4. Who solved the problem?
5. What did you learn from this exercise?

RADIOACTIVE SWAMP

TIME: 25 minutes.

MATERIALS: three pieces of cardboard or paper per group. Make each piece of cardboard approximately the size of a person's foot.

DESCRIPTION

1. Mark off your "swamp" with start and finish lines at least 10 yards apart.
2. Divide the group into groups of four or five. Designate a light person in each group to have paralyzed legs. Tell the groups they must attempt to get all their members across the radioactive swamp without getting contaminated.
3. Give each group three pieces of cardboard, which act as insulators from the chemicals.
4. Each participant must get across the swamp without touching the deadly chemicals (the ground). Only one foot can be placed on each insulator at one time. Only the insulators protect the individuals from the chemicals.
5. If a person touches the ground with a body part, he or she can't use that part for the rest of the exercise. If a person's whole body touches the ground, he or she must start over.
6. The "insulating blocks" may not be thrown across the swamp. Someone must bring them back each time.
7. The insulating blocks may not be slid. They must be picked up and placed where the participant wants them.

DISCUSSION

1. In what ways did you work together as a group to accomplish this exercise?
2. Who sacrificed a great deal for the group's success?
3. How did the presence of the "paralyzed" person in the group affect the way you went about solving the problem?
4. How did the "paralyzed" person feel throughout this exercise?
5. What else did you learn from this exercise?

2. Open Each Other Up

After bond building, take the second step by doing activities to get junior highers to open up. Give them the chance to tell more about themselves in a small group setting. Sharing isn't easy for junior highers; they often hesitate to express their thoughts.

Junior highers are afraid their peers will poke fun at them. That's why they must feel comfortable. And an exercise like Fantasy Island lets your junior highers do that.

With this exercise, a kid can be silly and reveal little about himself or herself. But the exercise also lets junior highers share on a deeper level. Regardless of how much junior highers share, this activity makes them open up even more.

FANTASY ISLAND

TIME: 15 minutes.

MATERIALS: none.

DESCRIPTION

1. Tell the kids they have the opportunity to create a fantasy identity.
2. Give the participants five minutes to each prepare their fantasy identity according to the following questions:
 - Who would you like to be?
 - Where would you live?
 - How old would you like to be?
 - What time in history (past, present or future) would you live?
 - What would your personality be like?
 - Who would you have as friends?
 - What would be your occupation?

DISCUSSION

1. Describe your imaginary person.
2. Tell the group why you chose those characteristics.
3. What's one thing you can do now to become more like the person you wish to be?

3. Affirm Each Other

The third step is affirming junior highers. Encouraging them with words of appreciation is crucial to their growing process. But junior highers find it difficult to give affirmations since they live in a world where putdowns rule. Try the activity Telegrams to get them started.

TELEGRAMS

TIME: 20 minutes.

MATERIALS: paper and a pencil for each person.

DESCRIPTION

1. Give each person a pencil and enough pieces of paper for every other group member.
2. Instruct the kids to each write a "telegram" (a short note) to each person in the group telling what they appreciate about him or her. Encourage the writers to sign their names. However, if you have an extremely shy group, give junior highers the option to leave notes unsigned.
3. Instruct the kids to each take off one of their shoes and place the shoe along the wall.
4. Use the shoes as "mailboxes" in which fellow group members deliver their telegrams.

4. Stretch Each Other

To accomplish step four, stretch your group members by getting them in an uncomfortable situation where they must take risks and work together. When the group develops a group-survival mentality, everyone in the group feels closer to each other. This is important because junior highers tend to gather in cliques or stick with a few close friends.

For junior highers to appreciate others, they need to lean on other people. And they need to depend on others who aren't their own friends. The body of Christ is bigger than a junior higher's group of friends. Kids need to realize others contribute a lot. Move your junior highers from a "small clique" mentality to a "whole group" mentality.

Stretching creates a way for junior highers to work as one team. When a stretching experience works, a camaraderie develops—similar to that in a group of marines who survived boot camp or a group of mothers who made it through labor and delivery. Do a variety of stretching exercises. Try a few of these.

- **Do physical stretching activities.** Get junior highers involved in a tough activity such as mountaineering, white-

water rafting or a ropes course where kids, tied into ropes, are suspended above ground. One group brings inner-city gang members on these outings. Not only are these kids challenged physically, they learn to befriend and trust kids from rival gangs.

- **Stretch junior highers to share their faith.** Kids can send letters to the sick telling them your junior high group prays for them. Or junior highers can share with a friend how important God is to them.

- **Stretch kids to cope with tough situations.** Use role plays or simulation games to put junior highers in stretching situations. Act out stressful situations such as divorce, sickness or death.

- **Put junior highers in an outreach situation.** Ministering to senior citizens, the physically handicapped, the poor or street people all work well. One junior high group in Pennsylvania works with mentally impaired adults. And Trevor Ferrell started a 33-bedroom house for the homeless when he was a junior higher.

5. Set Goals

If you've brought your group through the first four steps, you're ready to be honest. Take the last step of deeper sharing and goal setting.

Ask your junior highers to share their needs and dreams. Do Overcoming Adversity to get junior highers to identify concerns and set goals to overcome problems.

One junior high leader did this and discovered his group was worried about suicide. That leader turned his junior highers' fears into hope. And he brought his group closer. You can too! By taking these five steps, you'll change your junior highers' lives and build the group of your dreams. ■

Denny Rydberg is a director of university ministries in Washington and an author of several youth ministry resources.

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OVERCOMING ADVERSITY

TIME: 45 minutes.

MATERIALS: a handout and pencil for each person.

DESCRIPTION

1. Distribute a pencil and the following handout to each person.

Think of two problems you're currently dealing with. Answer the following questions about them in the spaces provided.

Problem	People and situations I blame for causing this problem
1.	1.
2.	2.
How I contribute to causing this problem	What I can do to make the situation better
1.	1.
2.	2.
What I could do that would make the situation worse	
1.	
2.	

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2. Give the group members 10 minutes to complete the handout.

DISCUSSION

1. Gather in a circle and have each person share one of his or her answers.
2. Allow others to ask questions to clarify answers or draw out each individual.