

Young Christians or

PERFORMING SEALS?

When we pelt kids with encouragement all the time, we reap a crop of **pressured, performance-based posers** who live in fear of letting us down. Here's how to affirm your kids without setting them up for failure.

BY PAUL DABDOUB

Kyle* was one of our success stories. In fact, he was the closest we've ever had to a bona fide poster boy for Christian teenagers. Even as a fifth-grader, the adults in our church were amazed at both his spiritual insights and passion for God. We all knew he was destined for great things, and we never hesitated to remind him about it.

Kyle made a smooth transition into junior high a couple of years ago. He faithfully showed up at all our weekend services and small-group meetings, and he served on several student leadership teams. He was cruising toward the happy future we'd all set before him.

And then it all came crashing down on him.

Several months ago, in a discipleship group Kyle attended, we discussed the pressure to perform. Specifically, we talked about living up to others' expectations. I had no idea that anything was striking a nerve with Kyle. But later, on his ride home from our group, he burst into tears. Through his sobs, he confessed to his mom that he was failing to live up to everyone's expectations. His surprised mom tried to console him. She told him that the encouraging words adults were always throwing at him were never meant to pressure him into being a "good Christian."

I was shocked and perplexed when I heard about Kyle's reaction. After all, we'd only been practicing a skill from Youth Ministry 101: Affirm, build up, and encourage your kids as often as possible. How could our good gift have produced such pressure and condemnation in this boy? Basically, Kyle buckled under the weight of our encouragement.

Praise can be a killer

Even before he joined our youth group I'd spent many hours with Kyle. And since he transitioned into junior high, I've spent many more hours with him at boxing matches,

basketball games, awards dinners, and the list goes on. If there ever were a kid I was close to, who I knew well, it was Kyle. So how could I have missed this? Why didn't he feel free to tell me about his gathering storm?

After beating my head against the wall for a week or so, the truth began to dawn on me. Affirmation and encouragement are wonderful gifts to teenagers, but not always. I've since discovered four ways encouragement can actually discourage my kids and impede their spiritual growth.

1. Kids feel pressured to perform in every area of life, and our affirming words can be just another brick on their backs.

I never expected Kyle to be a Super Christian. I simply affirmed what I thought was obvious to everyone. He shined as a Christian beyond most kids his age, and God had great things in store for his life. Harmless enough, right?

But what about the days when Kyle >>>
*Not his real name

When an affirmation creates expectations, it can **backfire**. IT'S GREAT TO CHALLENGE OUR KIDS, BUT *THEY'RE STILL KIDS*.

» wasn't shining or didn't feel like doing great things? Well, in our glowing portrait of Kyle there was no place for bad days. He was supposed to be Joe Christian—every day, all the time. Subtly he'd traded in his Spirit-driven life for an image-driven life. The pressure to keep it all up really took a toll on his life physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

2. Affirmation can unwittingly "pedestalize" a teenager.

The path to the top of a pedestal can be quick and easy. Getting down, however, is another story. Once our constant affirmations installed Kyle on top of his own private pedestal, he couldn't talk himself down. First, he liked being pedestalized—who wouldn't? Second, even if he'd tried to talk himself down, our adults would've forced him back up. We would've seen his attempts to diminish himself as false modesty or unnecessary fear or ridiculous doubt.

He was stuck on that pedestal, and that's why our little talk on "the pressure to perform" unleashed such a torrent of grief and fear—he was a prisoner to our unattainable expectations.

3. When we repeatedly tell our teenagers how great they are, we subtly communicate that they can't be real.

Kyle's life didn't line up with how we repeatedly described

him. He still had issues to deal with. He was angry with his neglectful father; he sometimes laughed with the boys who told obscene jokes; and he wrestled with lust. In Kyle's mind, no one God intended for "greatness" would deal with these issues.

So Kyle was in a painfully awkward place—if he were real about his problems he would disqualify himself from what God (we'd) called him to. If he came forward, the jig would be up and he'd never recover from it.

4. Affirmation that projects a glowing future for your kids can make them afraid to let you down.

My affirmation strategy with Kyle actually fostered an artificial relationship with him—he was the perfect Christian kid and I was his perfect spiritual mentor. The problem, of course, was that neither "truth" was true. Because I thought Kyle needed a perfect spiritual mentor, I transformed myself into one. In response, Kyle put on his best spiritual mask. We shared an awesome relationship that had no roots in reality.

Kids are used to putting on masks—they do it with their friends all the time. When young people finally gain the trust and acceptance from adults that they've craved, they'll do anything it takes to not let them down. »

what I wish I'd never done

What's been your biggest ministry mistake? Wish you could take it back? Don't. The truth is, it's impossible to make progress without making mistakes. The trick is to make smart mistakes—mistakes that move you ahead and teach you something as you go.

Here are five ideas to help you along the journey:

#1—If possible, make mistakes in theory, not practice.

Scientists often create models of experiments prior to actually mixing chemicals or lining up lab rats. Fatal flaws in programs can often be predicted if your first step is sitting down and thinking through an entire event, piece by piece.

#2—Do your homework.

Keep a journal of how your

retreats, activities, and lessons came off, and how your kids reacted. Maintain a file on each of your volunteers, including your take on the volunteer's weaknesses, strengths, and plans for development. The more you learn from experience, the better you'll be able to predict how kids and volunteers will react to your new ideas and situations. Pay special attention to documenting plans that flop; it's from those plans you can *really* learn.

#3—Don't hide mistakes—from yourself or others.

Effective youth ministers don't pretend their ministries are a long string of uninterrupted successes. Be as quick to share your mistakes as your successes at the next youth

workers networking meeting you attend. And don't deny to *yourself* that you goofed. When a program bombs, your first reactions will be embarrassment and anger. But, if you can learn from your mistakes, you'll make fewer of them. Become excellent at identifying where you made a critical error. Until you do, you're sure to repeat it.

#4—Build safety nets.

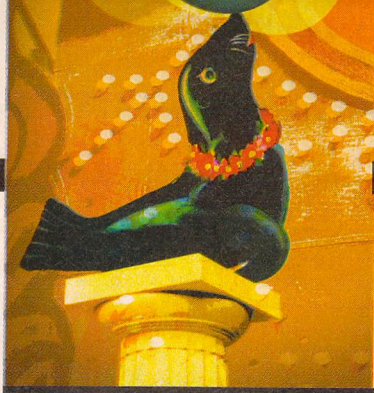
Become a fanatic about having a Plan B up your sleeve. What happens to your ski trip if there's no snow? to the picnic if it rains? if a kid gets hurt? Backup plans and safety nets help you keep "situations" from becoming "mistakes." Be a good scout: Expect the unexpected and be prepared.

#5—Ask yourself: How great

is the risk?

If you want a truly life-changing youth ministry, you need to take some risks. But be sure the risks you take are calculated risks. If making a mistake will endanger your ministry's credibility or someone's safety (for instance, taking kids on an overnighter into the backcountry when you've never been backpacking yourself), proceeding is foolhardy. Save your risk-taking for the small stuff that doesn't really matter.

Adapted from All-Star Bloopers From All-Star Youth Leaders (Group Publishing, Inc). To order a copy, go to www.amazon.com and search for the title.



IN OUR GLOWING PORTRAIT OF KYLE...

THERE WAS NO PLACE FOR BAD DAYS.
HE WAS SUPPOSED TO BE JOE CHRISTIAN
—EVERY DAY, ALL THE TIME.

» Guidelines for life-giving affirmation

You have kids just like Kyle in your group. And it's so easy for us to make them "affirmation casualties" if we don't practice a few practical guidelines.

1. Don't tie encouragement to unrealistic expectations.

Recently, college and NBA scouts completed their scouting reports on a very talented basketball player. Nothing significant about that, except the player is only 12 years old. Now, if you're 12 and you know professional scouts are studying you, you likely feel affirmed for your basketball skills. But what happens if your upward arc toward a multi-million-dollar contract suddenly changes its trajectory? This boy can only go down from where he is now, not up.

When an affirmation creates expectations, it can backfire. It's great to challenge our kids, but *they're still kids*. We're trained to spot potential and draw it out, but teenagers need to know our love (and God's love) is wholly independent of their accomplishments. When honest affirmation morphs into pressured expectations, we're setting our kids up for a fall. The Holy Spirit's pretty good at developing our potential—sometimes we need to step aside and let the Spirit do its work.

It was easy for me to overestimate Kyle's spiritual maturity. I wanted to believe he was a golden boy. But when I assumed he had it all together, I spent the majority of my time with him preparing him to minister and not enough time ministering to his needs. No matter how tall the budding spiritual giant, he's still a child. And all children carry a weight, a pain, and a battle. It's up to us to get under the hood and do a little diagnostic work, even if the engine seems to be purring along just fine.

2. Encourage, but don't do it with broad statements.

Every now and then, in our efforts to encourage, we really magnify the truth. It's all with good intent, but it carries a heavy price if it builds our kids up in a way that sets them up to fail.

Let's say one of your students creates a wonderful nativity scene out of popsicle sticks. You're zealous to affirm her, so you say: "God's given you the spiritual gift of arts and crafts. We need someone to lead our arts and crafts team. I'll call you this week to set it up." Because affirmation is powerful, she takes on this responsibility with excitement. But she has no leadership skills, and that dooms all her efforts. She calls it quits a month later and feels like a loser.

I think we do this sort of thing all the time, in much less blatant

ways. Encourage and affirm using genuine, simple, straightforward words. Don't stretch the truth in the name of encouragement. Less is more—just ask any retired professional athlete who revered his coach. You'll hear that praise came sparingly, but was always authentic when it was given.

3. Be real about your own struggles.

Sometimes we fear that showing kids our weaknesses will sap our credibility as leaders. Actually, the opposite is true. The Apostle Paul said, "When I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12:10).

Our kids pretty much believe that we do no wrong already. That's because they typically see us at our best. We spend the majority of our time in front of them talking about God, leading prayers, and discipling them. That one side of us is all they know, just as we typically know only their church side. In their minds, you live in your "up front" dimension all the time. Not true, of course, but it's tempting to let them go on believing what they see is the complete "you." We've got to find appropriate ways to puncture that balloon if we're aiming for authentic relationships.

Fortunately, in a car ride with Kyle after his minor meltdown, I said, "Hey Kyle, even Larry Bird had a bad day every now and then." To which he responded, "Who's Larry Bird?" Anyway, I did manage to salvage the illustration—I simply made the point that everyone has down days, including me. I went on to share some of my worst.

By exposing some of my weaknesses, I made authentic relationship possible and drove a stake into the heart of our temptation to pose and impress. Kyle and I had one of our best talks ever, and I got the chance to give what he really needed—pastoral care.

4. Create an environment of grace.

Affirmation really thrives in an environment of grace. Don't think you have to limit your encouragement to the good things your kids have done.

- Thank them for trusting you enough to share their struggles.
- Thank them for being trustworthy and accepting when you share your own struggles.
- Make heroes out of imperfect people.
- Talk about times when you've blown it, but don't glorify them (and don't always reach back to stories that happened when you were in high school—they need to hear stories from last week, too).
- Share stories of when you've received forgiveness from God and others.



I'm happy to say that Kyle didn't have to slip through the cracks or lose himself in a spiritual abyss before I made these changes to my ministry. Needed relief has come in a big way into his life. And now he has something real that can sustain him. ■



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