

Keys to asking GREAT Questions

Ultimately, only verbal communication can foster deep relational connections.

You want to ask the kind of questions that almost always get responses. **Good questions** guide, invite, reveal, and prompt teenagers to open up. Good questions have more than one "right answer."

Bad questions direct, threaten, intimidate, and prompt them to close up.

Closed questions (low yield, high control) are the bad variety—they're leading or limiting.

Leading questions imply a "right answer".

Limiting questions prompt one word answers such as "yes," "no," "fine," or simply a grunt.

Open-ended questions (high yield, low control) yield great results.

1. Get smaller. The smaller the discussion group, the more your kids will be *forced* to talk. Groups of 3-8 students are recommended. Provide them with a comfortable, neutral setting where they can sit close together.

2. Control who sits where. The second most powerful position in a small group is the person who sits across from the perceived leader. That person gets most of the eye contact. Your "talker" student often sits in this position. Your "thinker" student will often sit next to the leader because it's the safest position. The leader must turn his or her head to see that person. So make sure these students change positions before they settle into their chairs—this will encourage the "talkers" to talk less and the "thinkers" to talk more.

3. Make sure each person contributes something in the first few minutes. When you begin, ask teenagers to each say their name and answer a non-threatening, easy, open-ended question. Example: "What was the best part of your day today?" Invite, don't demand, each young person to speak.

4. The more honest and transparent you are, the more your kids will open up. If you want to know your students' stories, tell them yours. But be careful what you share. You can be too honest. Teenagers are not your peers, and they're not your counselors. Adult issues should stay in your accountability group.

5. Make sure your group is a safe place to share feelings. Feelings aren't right or wrong, they just are. But our natural inclination is to shut down, neutralize, or "solve" most negative feelings. This stifles discussion because kids get the message that your group isn't a safe place to say whatever they feel.

6. Your teenagers need a guide, not a moralizer. Your role is to facilitate discussion, not lecture. In a small-group discussion, the leader is *not* the supreme authority on every subject. Be slow to correct kids when they say

something you disagree with. Just wait—most often your teenagers will self-correct. Instead, help them think through their responses. Turn difficult questions or responses back to the group: "What do the rest of you think?" Volley the question back to the person who asked it.

7. Be grateful for every answer. We can inadvertently make students feel silly or dumb by a look, expression, or chuckle. Affirm your kids for participating. They need the freedom to say things that may not make sense.

8. Give kids enough time to respond. Don't be afraid of silence. Learn from it. That awkward pause gives them time to think, wrestle through their confusion, overcome their fear of sounding stupid, or get past their disappointment over getting cut from the tennis team or their anger over an argument with their parents.

Sometimes your questions get blank stares and silence because you've dived too deep, too soon. Most small-group leaders respond to silence by answering the question themselves. If your students think you'll answer a question anyway, they'll let you. On average, it takes eight seconds for our brains to process a question and formulate a response. So silently count to eight before rephrasing (not restating) the question. Ask, "What did you hear me say?" rather than "Did you understand what I said?". Tell students, "I'm going to ask this question, but I want 30 seconds of silence before anyone responds." Or have them turn to a partner and respond to the question. Or have them write their answers first, then respond verbally.

9. Don't be satisfied with the first response. Ask follow-up questions without evaluating. Vary your response pattern by:

Reflecting—"You seem to feel strongly about. . ."

Summarizing—"I hear you saying. . ."

Comparing or Contrasting—"This seems to fit with what David said, what do you think?"

Probing—"What reasons do you have for. . ." "How did you decide on. . ." "What do you mean by. . ." "Tell me more about. . ."

10. Involve all their senses. If you're leading a discussion about Christmas, you could ask: What does Christmas look like? sound like? smell like? taste like? feel like (physically and emotionally)?

11. Practice active listening. Be sensitive to what's happening in the group, and encourage kids to talk about what's important to them. Listening is more important than talking. God gave us two ears and one mouth for a reason. Don't ask questions if you're not ready to listen. Watch your body language and posture. Crossed arms, leaning back, and looking past kids at the door communicates you're not interested in what they're saying. Acknowledge them as they talk by leaning forward, maintaining eye contact, nodding your head, and smiling. Resist the temptation to stop listening when you anticipate what they're about to say. Listen with your eyes and your heart.

conversation-starter ideas

1. Have kids each tell about their best and worst moments from the previous week.
2. Have them each tell something that makes them different from anyone in the group.
3. Play the Two Truths and a Lie game. Have kids each say three things about themselves—two true statements and one lie. Then have the rest of the group guess which statement is the lie.
4. Play the I Have Never game. Give everyone a handful of pennies. Then go around the room and have kids each tell something they've never done that they think everyone else has done. They get a penny from each person who's done the thing they mention. The object is to end up with the most pennies.
5. Ask each person to think of three people, past or present, they admire and why.
6. Play the 20 Questions game. Think of an item in the room. Then have your teenagers ask up to 20 questions before guessing what item you've picked.
7. Ask open-ended questions.
 - Your house is on fire—what five things would you rescue besides people and animals?
 - What three things would you take to a desert-island?
 - What quality do you appreciate most in a friend?
 - What's one characteristic you received from your parents that you want to keep?
 - How would you like a friend to describe you at your funeral?
 - When, if ever, did God become more than a word to you?

question-asking skills

1. Ask a question, then a name. If you speak a person's name first, no one else will listen.
2. Don't ask two-part questions. Questions with an "and" or "but" in them are too confusing.
3. Ask questions that make them the experts. "If you were Peter, what would you do?" or "What does the average teenager in your school think about people who go to church?"
4. Use a brief movie video clip to set up your questions.
5. Use three kinds of Bible study questions:
 - Observation (ask only a few of these)—"What does this passage say?"
 - Interpretation (ask more of these)—"What does this passage mean?"
 - Application (ask many of these)—"What does this passage mean to you?"

12. Give room for disagreements. When you're okay about disagreements, you're essentially communicating: "You don't have to agree on everything to be a part of this group." In fact, be the devil's advocate if it seems like your teenagers are agreeing with each other excessively.

13. Don't push to tie up all the loose ends.

Jesus often left questions unanswered. Try it—you'll see it forces them to think more deeply. .

Why your kids won't Talk

You've tried everything you know, but nothing seems to work. What's going on?

1. Some teenagers will dominate the discussion if you let them.

They never let other students get a word in. Often these talk-a-lot kids chatter because they're insecure.

Solutions: Tell your chatterers privately that you value their insights, but you want to give others who tend to hang back an opportunity to share. Ask them to help you draw out less talkative teenagers. Develop a signal to let the talker know when it's appropriate to speak up.

2. "Churchy" teenagers can stifle participation by giving all the right answers.

Sometimes these kids sound like parrots—they know what they're supposed to say, but may or may not own their answers. They don't stop long enough to think through the question or their response.

Solutions: Question their answers. Ask them application questions. Ask them opinion questions. Ask them a lot of "why" questions. You'll force them to think deeper.

3. Shy kids can make a discussion awkward and excruciating.

Of course, it's okay to be quiet. Some people simply process their world inwardly. Our goal is not to make introverts into extroverts. But we do want to make them feel comfortable so they can speak up when they want to.

Solutions: Show them it's safe to join in the discussion. Be real about your own imperfections. When they believe you have flaws just like them, they'll talk your ear off.

Ask questions about their **school** (classes they attend, assignments they're working on, school activities they participate in)

likes and dislikes (food, clothing, music, movies, TV and magazines), **interests and hobbies** (you may discover you have a similar interest), **religious background** (theirs & parents' beliefs & practices).