

EVERY LIFE
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A concerned father of one of your teenagers calls and asks you to join him for lunch on Friday. The prospect of free food has a gravitational pull on you, so you agree. On the drive to the meeting you wonder what's going on with his daughter.

- Is she in some kind of trouble?
- Maybe she's pregnant?
- Is she cutting?
- Is she acting out and fighting with her parents?
- Is she bingeing and purging?
- Is she threatening to run away?

You brace yourself for any and all of these possibilities—but, really, how can you prepare for the dark unknown of a parent meeting? You sit down and the dad looks a little nervous—he launches right into the issue and, you must admit, you never saw this one coming....

"My daughter and I are close," he says, with a slight smile. "This weekend she confided in me that she has no idea what she wants to do with her life." Then he leans into the table and locks his eyes on yours: "How do I help her find her way into the future? How do I come alongside her as she tries to figure out what she should do with her life? What should I do?"

What would you say to this eager, hungry dad?

Even more, what are you doing to equip parents and your adult leaders to help your teenagers find their way into their futures?

TWO FUNDAMENTAL TRUTHS

Mature youth workers help students embrace and live into two truths—both of them are fundamental to their healthy spiritual formation.

1 The truth of the Christian faith. The Apostle John reveals his heart when he says, in 3 John 1:4 "I have no greater joy than this, than to hear of my children walking in the truth." It is the work of parents, caring adults, and the church to lead students to an authentic understanding of Jesus and the Christian faith. When this happens heaven rejoices and we celebrate. This is critical. This is primary—our #1 task. But now what?

2 The truth of their unique identity. Once a teenager has embraced and is living in the outrageous love of Jesus, their great quest is to discover who God has uniquely made them to be. As they grow into themselves, will they know enough about their true identity to make their mark on planet earth? The pursuit of "their truth" is all about helping students get a lasting taste of...

- who they are,
- what they should do with their life, and
- how their talents can find their sweet-spot out in the real world.

In a 2010 GROUP Magazine survey of 26,000 Christian teenagers, nine out of 10 (89.9 percent) said they agree with this statement: "I am fully convinced that God has created me for a particular purpose in life that will bring glory to Him." So, who will be determined and proactive enough to help them find the "particular purpose" they're pretty sure God has envisioned for them? Or, more simply, who will help them find their way? Is it you?

If you're answering yes right now, I'd like to help you become an expert in something I call the KidUnique approach. It's not just a relational strategy for "revealing" your teenagers, it's a wholistic approach to training parents and adult leaders to maximize the kids they care so much about.

College and professional athletes spend long hours studying opposing teams to increase their chances of winning. Smart business people spend months investigating a potential merger to ensure success in a future venture. Isn't it wise to invest the necessary time and energy into helping teenagers discover who they are so they can win in life? The KidUnique approach will help kids solve "the mystery of me." Every life is a mystery waiting to be uncovered, not a mistake needing to be corrected.

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PRACTICING THE BASICS

Every discipline requires a mastery of its fundamentals—the KidUnique approach is built on three basic practices.

1 Turn your dreams for your teenagers into expected outcomes. Business guru Stephen Covey advises leaders to “begin with the end in mind”—and that’s excellent advice for us, too. Through our love, focused intercessory prayer, and personalized pursuit, we want teenagers to...

- feel loved and know they matter because we’ve paid acute attention to them;
- experience a boost in self-esteem as they’re reminded that they’re a miracle, not a mess;
- learn more deeply how to respect themselves and others;
- discover their talents and strengths by launching themselves into new adventures and opportunities;
- learn to both appreciate and live into their true self;
- identify “what’s right” about them instead of “what’s wrong” about them; and
- learn to hear the voice of God and receive the help of God, because they’ve learned to listen to God.

2 Commit to going “all-in” in God’s mission to “unlock” your teenagers’ true identity. When we’re talking about responding well to constructive criticism, we remind ourselves to “not take it personally.” But when the focus is on revealing your kids’ God-given purpose in life, we have to take it personally. And when you take something personally, you’ll need a greater measure of courage.

When I played basketball in school my coach once gave me an unforgettable challenge: “Webster, this Friday night is the most important game of the season. I need your ‘A’ game, son. Bring the best you’ve got!” Likewise, I believe the Lord is staring each of us in the face and saying, “Hey, I don’t want your ‘B’ game or your ‘C’ game for this crucial expression of my love and care—I want your ‘A’ game. Bring your best for this kid.”



Youth workers and parents who pursue the KidUnique approach are a bit strange. They wake up everyday with a teenager on their mind, and they don’t hold back in cautious safety as God directs them to move into that teenager’s life. They don’t just think about this task, they get after it. They intentionally pursue a student’s true identity, ponder it, and then share what they see as God leads.

3 Embrace the Four-Window Model of discovery and unleash its power in kids’ lives. I’ve been a dad to three sons and a mentor to hundreds of young leaders over the years—I’ve learned a lot of priceless lessons about engaging people well. My experiences have coalesced in something I call the Four-Window Model. Each window in this model unleashes a powerful force for discovery in our mission to help teenagers find and embrace their “second truth.” Embrace this model and you’ll alter the relational compass in your brain—you’ll know much better how to navigate your relationships with students for identity-clarifying impact.

OBSERVATION unleashes the power of seeing a teenager well. Observation is the first window we peer through as we attempt to help students discover who they are. Those who leverage the Observation window understand that there is a story unfolding right before their eyes in the lives of the students they love, so they slow down enough to “see” it. This is a powerful force in the discovery process.

Observation is as simple as just paying attention. Look away from yourself and other distractions and lock your focus on a teenager. Pay closer-than-normal attention when they play, study, and interact with others. Notice their reactions. Notice what they notice. My friend Rick Lawrence (you might have heard of him) recently told me that to observe a kid well we must become sleuths who study their “clues,” like Sherlock Holmes. He is right.

When we give kids the gift of close observation we’re simply studying a young person as he or she grows up, then describing glimpses of what we see at any given moment. Observation communicates both interest and value. In Proverbs 5:21, Solomon says, “Our ways are before the eyes of the Lord, and he watches all our paths.” Inherent in God’s loving nature is that he sees his creation. God pays attention to those he loves, and we reflect his heart when we pay unusual attention to the students we love.

EXPLORATION unleashes the power of discovery in a teenager's life. The Exploration window is all about students exploring life and discovering who they are along the way. To help them, we'll have to have an explorer's heart, too. Explorers are restless to discover—they're always encouraging new adventures and love to see teenagers take on new opportunities. Adults with an explorer's heart push into new territory, understanding on ever-deeper levels the terrain of a teenager's life. As they do this they inspire their kids to value the exploration process themselves.

The Apostle Paul instructed young Timothy to "pay close attention to yourself" (1 Timothy 4:16). He wasn't telling Timothy to be selfish or self-absorbed—he was reminding Timothy that paying close attention to yourself will reveal truths you need to know. Paul wanted Timothy to pay attention to his reactions to people and challenges, looking for revealed truths about himself. What was interesting (or uninteresting) to him gave him clues into the person God created him to be.

The same is true for us. As the young people we love bump into life, we pay attention. As they do new things and discover they are good at some and not so good at others, we pay attention. As opportunities present themselves and they are drawn to them or repulsed by them, we pay attention. And in our conversations with them we encourage them to pay better attention to their reactions. Exploration inspires kids to learn about themselves by trying new opportunities and adventures. As they do, we discuss their reactions and identify their interests and strengths.

AFFIRMATION unleashes the power of telling a teenager what's right with them. The Affirmation window has the potential to unleash your students' gifts upon the world and unlock their God-given extraordinary impact. We fuel our teenagers' future success through targeted affirmation—there are few things more powerful in life.

Every young person has an upside and a downside—that's true of all of us. Affirmation is simply telling teenagers what's right about them. We see beyond what's wrong and point out what's right. We notice, then communicate verbally, the upside truth of the person God has created them to be. Jesus did this. He went out of his way to convince his followers they had value and could become difference-makers in the lives of others:

- "I will make you fishers of men" (Mark 1:17).
- "You are the rock..." (Matthew 16:18).
- "You are my friends..." (John 15:15).


These are wonderfully affirming statements that had to fill up the disciples' hearts. When you affirm, based on observation and exploration, your students are going to feel the transforming power of truth in their life.

REVELATION unleashes the power of listening to God and praying for a teenager. KidUnique adults believe that God made each of their students uniquely, or "fearfully and wonderfully," to use the Psalmist's words. But God knows them better and loves them deeper than we ever could. We desperately need his help with this process.

Ultimately we understand that our teenagers must discover God's will about who they are and what they should do with their life. But, we do everything we can to identify and call out what God has put into them. Learning to look through the Revelation window begins with me saying to God: "I need your help. I can't do this alone."

"Fearfully and wonderfully made" helps us pinpoint King David's moment of revelation, in Psalm 139:14: "I will give thanks to you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; wonderful are your works, and my soul knows it very well." In his soul, David knew who he was and what God's will was for his life—he knew it "very well." It's our longing for our students to know what David knew.



The Four-Window Model has power. Each window gives us a pragmatic way to put love into action. Each gives us a way to gain new perspective on who our teenagers are. Observation helps us see what we can see in them. Exploration nudges them out into personal experiences that will help them discover new truths about themselves. Affirmation reminds them to embrace what's right about them. Revelation drives us to our knees, earnestly asking God for insight and help. Together with God, let's change the world—one teenager at a time. 



At Willow Creek Community Church in Chicago, Dan pioneered the largest youth ministry in the world—then he burned out and lost it all. For the last 20 years he's been a pastor to pastors and a leadership coach with Authentic Leadership. He created a video training kit called *KidUnique* (kidunique.com) to help youth workers and parents learn the Four-Window Model. He lives in Michigan.

