



# 18 Ways to Build Relationships with Students

## 1. Love Them

Without a doubt, this is the most important thing that you can do to better relate to teenagers. They're desperate for someone to love them for who they are. If you really do, they'll know it. If you don't, you can't hide it.

A youth pastor brought a well-known youth specialist to his church to help him structure his youth ministry. The expert met with the church board, youth sponsors, did some evangelism with the students, and wrapped the whole weekend up with a great rally at the church on Sunday evening. The entire weekend was a great success. The youth pastor and the expert got to know each other pretty well over the long weekend. The next day on the way to the airport the youth pastor asked the expert if he had any last minute advice. The expert thought a minute then said, "Yeah, just one thing—quit youth ministry!" The youth pastor was stunned and asked for an explanation. "It's obvious that you don't love teenagers. You're a great guy, you have many talents, but you don't love teenagers. Quit now or you'll just get frustrated."

Ask God for a burden and love for the teenagers in your community. If you don't really love students, all the tips in the world won't help.

## 2. Give Special Treatment to Your Favorites

Many people think playing favorites is wrong. There were some parents of teenagers talking about how a new youth leader was having a problem with showing favoritism in the youth group. It seems the former youth leader never had this problem. One of the parents spoke up, "Oh he had this problem alright. The only difference was that all the kids were his favorites."

Treat every teenager, those in the church and

those outside of the church, as favorites and you can't miss.

## 3. Earn Respect, Don't Demand It

Many adults think that teenagers automatically owe them respect based solely on their adult status. In reality, it doesn't work that way. Jesus could have come into the world and demanded respect, but he didn't. By his lifestyle, his actions, and ultimately by His sacrifice, He earned our genuine respect. We're called to do the same.

## 4. Be Yourself

Who is the model youth worker? There is no model for the perfect youth worker. What students need, more than anything else, is adults who are authentic. Nobody can spot a phony better than a teenager. If God has called you to work with teenagers, you've already got what it takes. The model youth worker is one who is authentic.

## 5. Remember Your Own Adolescence

It is really amazing how fast some people grow up and forget what it was like to be a teenager. Our society and culture has probably changed since you were a teenager, but the struggles and emotions are the same. Take the time to remember your teenage years and you'll begin to relate with students.

## 6. Spend Time in Their World

When kids come to church or to your home, they are in your world. If you really want to be effective in relating to teenagers, spend time in their world.

A youth pastor had church service on Wednesday nights and a campus meeting on Thursday mornings, which many of the same students



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attended. A strange pattern developed After the meeting on Thursday, with only minutes before the next class, students would come up to the youth pastor and want to discuss something that had been discussed in the Wednesday service. Why talk with only minutes to spare on Thursday, when they had plenty of time to talk about the same thing on Wednesday? The youth pastor was more approachable on Thursday because she was in their world. The youth pastor was easier to approach because the students felt comfortable and in control. Isn't that what Jesus did for us?

## 7. Tell Them You Like Them

It is great to feel love for the teenagers in your life. It is even better to show them love. But don't forget to tell them how you feel about them. Tell them face to face and eye to eye that you like them, believe in them, and care about them. We all love to hear it from someone we know means it.

## 8. Worry About Their Insecurities Not Yours

It really doesn't matter if teenagers like you. It is not important. What is important is that you like them. We all have insecurities. In relating effectively with teenagers, it's important to lay aside our insecurities and help them deal with theirs.

## 9. Keep Your Sense of Humor

You don't have to be a funny person to relate to teenagers, but you sure do need a sense of humor. Take your ministry seriously, take the challenge to reach this generation with the gospel seriously, take your senior pastor seriously, but don't take yourself seriously. If you need some help, the students in your youth group along with their friends at school can help you out!

## 10. Don't Rush the Relationship

Real, genuine, healthy relationships take time. If you force or rush relationships they become self-serving and shallow. A youth pastor was having a difficult time relating to one of his students. It seemed like they could never have any honest communication. On the way home from a retreat the student asked, "So when are you planning on leaving and getting your own church? It only took our last youth pastor a year and a half." This student wanted to know if the youth pastor was willing to be there for him for the long haul, or if he would leave when something better came along. It takes a while for a student to open their heart to someone. When they give it to you, treat it as a precious gift to be treasured and handled with care.

## 11. Listen

If you want to learn to relate well to teenagers, learn to listen. There is nothing more important to a teenager than feeling like someone understands them. In order to do this, you will need to become a good listener. It is impossible to relate well to teenagers without good listening skills.

## 12. Listen

This point cannot be overemphasized. Learn to ask questions and then really listen. Don't worry about thinking up the right answer — just listen. Never give advice before you have listened carefully. Only after you have taken the time to really hear what they are saying, will you have earned the right to give suggestions.

## 13. Listen

Many adults incorrectly assume that listening to a teenager explain their feelings or actions



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means that you are condoning a situation. As a result, the adult feels a constant need to correct the teenager with comments. This will kill communication. If you are living the kind of life you should, students will be aware of your position on issues. Assume that, and concentrate on listening to how they feel.

## 14. Be Liberal with God's Grace

God's work doesn't depend on us. We are only instruments. You will never mess up if you are liberal with God's grace and love. Give it freely, even to those who are not responding. Let them remember you as God's instrument of love. God will even use that memory to continue to draw them to Him.

## 15. Educate Yourself About the Youth Culture

We would never consider sending a missionary to the field without first making sure that he or she was educated about the culture they were trying to reach. They would need to understand the society, the language, and how to best present the gospel to that particular culture. Things are not different in youth ministry. Keep yourself educated about youth culture.

## 16. Elevate Each Individual's Uniqueness

Being unique is very important to teenagers. Find something unique and positive about each teenager that you have a relationship with and encourage them by remembering it and elevating it.

## 17. Admit Your Mistakes

In Matthew 5:8, Jesus tells us how to easily relate to and lead teenagers. He says, "Be

perfect, therefore as your heavenly father is perfect." If you can be perfect, you will have no problems. Most people haven't quite figured out how to do that. Your students have probably figured that out too. A new youth director decided to show a movie at his first youth convention. The movie was great, when he was a teenager. Through the years, it not only lost its effectiveness, but it actually became comical. The students were stunned. Was this the kind of cutting edge ministry the new director was going to provide for them? After the movie, the director made his way to the platform, and as usual, asked everyone to bow their heads and close their eyes. "No one looking around, please. A lot of you are wondering why I showed that movie. I've thought about it, prayed about it, and I have no idea why I showed that movie.

The students went crazy! They were proud to have a leader who was big enough to admit his mistakes. The Lord has a way of providing many opportunities for you to exercise this special way of relating to teenagers.

## 18. Believe In Them

Many people have given up on teenagers. If you are going to be effective in relating to and ultimately reaching teenagers with the gospel, you have to believe in them. The church must do more than just tolerate teenagers. The church desperately needs teenagers. They are an example. They can bring genuine faith and authenticity back to the church. God desires to use teenagers in fulfilling this mission. We have the opportunity to be part of this plan. Spend some time with students who are energized by the Spirit of God and you will have no trouble believing in them and more importantly, the God who loves them.