



**Easy Changes That Yield Huge Results:**  
How To Increase Your Teenagers' Engagement in the Church:

If you've been in youth ministry for more than fifteen minutes, you can surely attest to the fact that getting teenagers to engage is often pretty difficult. It's been said that the teenage brain is wired differently than the rest of humanity, and sometimes, we have all seen the anecdotal evidence to prove it! But of course, somehow, we adults don't remember being wired that way at all when we were teens. Sound familiar?

Our team has been there. We remember those days we felt ourselves almost begging our teens to attend events at church. We remember wanting to punch secular activities in the face. We remember asking how in the world we were ever going to motivate our teens to participate more fully in the life of the Church-and without pressuring them into it! Oh yes, we've been there. We can totally relate. Sometimes, it is nothing short of deflating to know how to improve your youth program, especially when we can't figure out why teens don't always prioritize their life in the Church, or why they don't want to show up at youth group efforts. There's always some other 'important' thing.

The Faithtree Resources team has studied a lot of teens, and we have identified three critical tweaks that will significantly empower you as a leader, and also, will benefit your youth program in ways that ***deeply increase your teenager's engagement in the Church.***

Take a look at these tweaks- or shifts in mindset, actually- written below and begin to think about how these small changes can yield huge results in your youth program.

As always, know that our team is praying for you and praying that your ministry may be pleasing to God.

And be encouraged! We are confident, if you implement these small changes, you will see great results!

God bless all you do for His teens!

*The Faithtree Resources Team*

## Easy Changes That Yield Huge Results

Our team loves getting to talk with youth workers all over the country, from every size and demographic of church setting. Big, small, new, older, mission, cathedral-you name it. And even though these local communities have many differentiating factors, one thing they all have in common is a desire to have a deeply engaged youth group. And one conversation we've participated in many times is this: how come teens are so hard to get to church or youth program?

The following conversation changes can help you get your teens more deeply engaged, and God willing, more permanently. Each of the three tweaks is followed by a question and answer section to help you more practically apply the suggested change.

### I. Focus on what is, not what isn't.

**Instead of asking why it's hard to get your teens involved, start with asking what their current level of involvement actually looks like. This small tweak will give you great information that you can actually act upon.**

**Question to help you: How can I assess the level of my teens engagement in our program?**

**Answer:** Great question! We encourage you to take out a pen, and reflect on the current status of your youth's engagement with the Church, with you, and with the youth program. Don't be afraid to journal your responses and dig into what your specific pain points are. Try hard (and it might be hard) to be super honest with yourself. No one else will read your answers. Don't be unnecessarily harsh or critical of yourself, but don't try to make everything peachy if it's not. Just take a moment to honestly evaluate the answers to the following thoughts we've drafted for you to contemplate as you get started:

- Describe the overall engagement of your teens in the Church. Avoid judging if their engagement is good or bad. Just describe what it looks like overall. (for example, "we have 75% attendance at half of our services", or "the teens in our program are asking to participate more directly throughout the Liturgical year".) The point is to gather a detailed description of what is currently taking place.
- Describe the overall engagement of your teens in the youth program.
- What types of settings, programs, and activities seem to grab their attention regularly and with ease?

- What types of settings, programs, and activities do your teens seem uninterested in?
- As you pay attention to the settings and activities that your teens are most receptive to in, what are the common factors? What elements may be keeping them engaged?
- As you think about the events, settings, or programs that are the most difficult to get the teens to or the most difficult to keep them engaged in, consider again, what are the common factors? What elements may be turning them off?
- How much fruitful conversation is facilitated in your youth program? Is it hard to start discussions with the teens? Is it hard to get them to share or to keep the conversation going? Either way, why do you think this might be?
- If you find it hard to facilitate great discussions, do you sense the kids are interested in the topics? Do they seem unengaged, and maybe even bored?
- Would you say your teens are comfortable to share their thoughts and opinions? How can you tell?
- When you facilitate discussions how much do the teens drive the conversations compared with how much you drive the conversations? How much are you talking compared with how much they talk? (Flesh this out. Time yourself if you have to, to make sure you are totally self-aware.) How often do you ask them what they would like to discuss? Are there conversations you stay away from?
- During discussions, what is the tone of the conversation? Does it get heated? Do people attack other's opinions? How do you handle those situations?
- What modes of communication do you use to connect with your teens (i.e. email, Facebook, texting, other social media, etc.)? How quickly do they respond to each of the various methods of communication? Are there any methods of communication that get little or no response?

## 2. Change your meeting space.

**Now, wait! Hear us out. We don't mean for you to change the physical 'where'. You'll still be in the same Sunday School classroom or youth room. What we mean is, create a safe space that your teens want to come to, that is safe and inviting, and then defend its preservation with your life.**

*Teens want to be engaged in spaces where they feel safe, respected, free to be themselves, and spaces where they fit in.*

Question to help you: Is our youth group the safest place in the world for our teens? Why or why not?

Answer: Great question! *Here are some ways to cultivate this kind of a space:*

- Talk about it
  - Have a conversation with your group about the elements that make up a space they all want to be in. Have them come up with a list of ground rules for their gatherings, type it up, and mount it to one of the walls in your gathering space. Your teens need to be involved in conversations about respecting the thoughts, opinions, and feelings of their peers. Some great examples of ground rules are:
    - Respect everyone's opinions, thoughts, and feelings even if we don't agree with them
    - Give everyone a chance to ask their questions and share their opinions
    - Keep what we share private to this group
    - No question is a bad question
    - Maintain a positive attitude
    - Have an open mind
    - Have fun!
- Be quick to affirm and slow to react
  - Even when a teen gives a response that is clearly against the church's beliefs, be slow to react and correct. Inquire about why they think that, try to figure out where this thought is coming from. When you furthering the conversation in this way, you affirm that each teen has a right to their thoughts, feelings, and opinions. When you better understand where they are coming from, you can better attend to them.
- Be proactive in breaking up cliques
  - Cliques are very common and can be very destructive. Pay attention to the formation of cliques. Pull aside the kids who seem to be ring leaders and ask them what they have noticed about the group dynamics. Invite them to take on the responsibility of including those who seem to be on the outside. If the cliques seem to continue, talk to the group as a whole, and plan activities that break up the group and get the kids to know people they may not know as well.
- Model the values
  - If you want your program have a respectful and non-judgmental space - set that tone. It is easy to form cliques ourselves, spending more time with the people we more easily connect with. We may be tempted to criticize opinions we don't agree with. Model the ground rules you have set with your group. The teens will follow your lead.

### **3. Start speaking in a different language.**

**We know, that sounds kind of absurd. But follow us for a second.**

*Instead of teaching with a program, curriculum or memory verse in mind, we suggest you change to a relationship-focused model of teaching. This tweak will yield the greatest of rewards. Teens respond to people not programs. The more you are able to engage in real and meaningful relationships with your teens, the more they will be engaged with the church and their faith. To do this, you must be able to speak in the language of your teens.*

*Question: How can I build better, stronger relationships by using specific communication strategies that build relationship?*

*Answer: Great question! And we know it can be hard. Here are some ways in which to do that:*

- Be real
  - Teens are observant and they will see right through you. If you are teaching them to live a Christian life, you better be striving to live one as well, or you will lose credibility with them real quickly.
  - But, it is also good for your teens to know you are not perfect. Be real with them and allow them to see your weaknesses (appropriately) and let them know regularly that you are not perfect. Teens will connect better with an imperfect youth worker than a perfect one.
- Inquire about their lives
  - Ask them what they do with their time outside of church, find out what extra-curricular activities they are involved with, ask about their friends and what they like to do with their friends, what kind of music they listen to, what they like about their favorite TV shows, or what movies they have seen lately.
  - This interest sends the message that you are interested in who your teens are, not just that they come to church. It opens communication, gives you an insight into their lives, and is the springboard for a deeper relationship. If we want our teens to share their struggles with us, we first have to get them to share their joys with us.
- Remember what they have going on in their lives
  - If your teenagers tell you that they have a big game coming up or an important art show or a major test, follow up with them and ask them how it went.
  - Following up with them shows them that their lives are important enough for you to remember; this builds trust.
- Be present in their lives outside church
  - You can't possibly be at every important event for every kid, but make it a priority to get to at least one extracurricular event for each teenager; this is as much youth ministry as hanging out with them at church is.
  - When you enter into their space outside of church you are ministering to them as Christ ministered to us, by coming into our space.
- Pay attention for mood shifts
  - If your teens seem off, distracted, sad, quieter than normal, ask them how they are doing, gently identify the shift in mood and ask them about it. If you know them well enough to notice the mood shift, you know them well

enough to inquire. If the teen seems closed off to sharing, respect the boundary; your inquiry will communicate your care. If they open up, be a listening and supportive presence.

- Laugh with them
  - These kids experience so many pressures in their lives, sometimes they just need to unwind and experience the joy of life. Laugh with them, have fun with them, enjoy their company, this will show them that you not only care about them but that you enjoy them.
  - As mentioned earlier, if you want your teens to feel comfortable sharing their struggles with you, they have to be able to share their joy with you.
- Be available
  - Make sure they know they can reach out to you by reminding them if they ever need anything, you are there for them, to talk or to be a listening ear
- And finally, adjust how you talk to them
  - Let them drive the conversation. You may have a lot you want to share with and teach them, but they have a lot of their own questions. Allow their voice to be heard and their thoughts to drive the conversation.
  - Talk about the tough issues. Sometimes we want to avoid the tough conversations because, well, they are tough! We don't always have the answers and we are anxious about the tension the conversations may invite. But these are the conversations our teens need to have. Don't be afraid to walk into these topics with them and don't be afraid to say, "I don't know, but I will find out" when you don't have the answer.
  - Help them learn how to think instead of telling them what to think. We want our teens to take ownership of their faith and to truly internalize truth. This happens when we facilitate reflection and conversation not when we lecture them.
  - Speak in a language they understand. Avoid the heavy theological jargon. Christ taught in parables, we too should speak the rich truth of our faith using words our teens understand.
  - Communicate in their mode of communication. This means, if your teens are on Instagram, have an Instagram presence and post encouraging photos and quotes or use it to advertise your program's schedule. If your teens only pay attention to Snapchat, remind them about meetings, events, and church services via Snapchat. We are not advising that social media be your main means of ministering, but it can be really helpful place to start from. The more you can step into their reality and meet them where they are at, the more you will see them responding.