

Ten Ways

TO CONNECT WITH CHILDREN AND TEENS IN YOUR CHURCH



According to research by the folks at Fuller Youth Institute, one of the most important factors in determining whether youth stay in the church is whether they have strong relationships with at least five non-related members of the congregation. Think about that for a minute. Relationships with believing adults within a congregation can have a lifelong impact on the faith of a young person. How can you be one of those people to the children and teens in your church?

It takes a village—the whole congregation—to nurture the faith of its young people. *Helping Our Children Grow in Faith* author Robert J. Keeley describes the purpose and role of that village like this: “If we want our children to consider their faith a central part of who they are, if we want their faith to go beyond just their minds and hearts, then the community of faith needs to develop a number of ways to connect with young people and children” (p. 21). You’ll find ten of those ways below.

1 KNOW THEM BY NAME

There’s no better way to communicate to children and teens that you see them as individuals than to learn and use their name. And when you see or talk with a young person, intentionally brighten your eyes and smile—look excited to see them. You’ll be amazed by what a difference this simple action makes. When you do these things, you’re saying, “You belong here. You are part of God’s family.”

2 SPEND TIME WITH THEM

If you want to build relationships with the young people in your congregation, meet them where they are. Use your gifts to show Christ’s love to children in the nursery, in children’s worship or Sunday school, in VBS, in kids’ clubs, or in youth ministry programs. Talk with the children and teens sitting near you in church and seek them out during coffee time after church.

3 BE CURIOUS

When a child says, “I went to the zoo today!” continue the conversation by asking questions: “Tell me more about that. What was your favorite part?” “Which animal would you like to have for a pet?” With older children, ask what they like to read, what their favorite school subject is, what they would do if they had a whole day to themselves. Some people develop a “mental library” of interesting, open-ended questions that they can draw on when talking with kids and teens.

4 BE REAL

Don’t feel you need to be an all-knowing adult. Be honest about not having it all figured out. Tell about times you’ve had to trust in God. Practice empathy. Let young people know you’ve done awkward things too. Laugh along with them. And when you’re sad or concerned about something, invite them to pray for you.

5 REACH OUT

When you hear that young people in your congregation are having a difficult time, let them know you care, if the situation is not a confidential one. Send a note. Let them know you're praying. Remind them that God loves them. It might sometimes feel awkward to reach out in this way, but the more you do it the more comfortable it will become.

6 AFFIRM THEIR GIFTS

When you notice a Christ-like trait or a gift well used, say so! Look for opportunities to encourage children and teens as they become the people God created them to be. Avoid hollow praise ("You're the best artist in the world!") and focus on affirmation ("You're such a good friend. Being a loving person is a real gift from God, and you definitely have that gift.") Give children and teens opportunities to lead God's people in worship and other areas.

7 PRACTICE INCLUSION

In many congregations there are young people who are on the autism spectrum, who have physical challenges, or who have intellectual differences such as Down syndrome. Speak with their families to learn about the best ways to communicate with their children. Help find ways to make your congregation the most welcoming place of all. To learn more, visit the Disability Concerns website at crcna.org/disability.

8 LOOK BEYOND WHAT YOU SEE

Children may be shy and teens may appear disinterested when you speak with them; and neither group has mastered the art of conversation. Don't expect them to show the same level of interest in your life as you do in theirs. Recognize that the process of becoming an adult can make one feel uncomfortable in one's own skin. Your job is to look past their skin to the person within.

9 TELL FAITH STORIES

Telling your faith stories can have an enormous impact on the faith formation of children. Look for formal and informal ways to tell kids and teens what God has done in your life and the lives of others in your community. Provide opportunities for them to tell you about how they're experiencing God at work in their lives too! For ideas, visit our Faith Storytelling toolkit at crcna.org/faithformation/toolkits.

10 WORSHIP, LEARN, AND SERVE TOGETHER

Look for ways to incorporate intergenerational experiences into all aspects of your church's life. When planning worship services, educational opportunities, and service activities, ask how all ages can be included in meaningful ways. For ideas, visit our Intergenerational Church toolkit at crcna.org/faithformation/toolkits.

The Faith Formation Ministries team is available to consult and brainstorm with you on these ideas and more. We'd also love to hear your faith formation stories so we can share them with others. You'll find our contact information at crcna.org/FaithFormation.

© 2017 Faith Formation Ministries



crcna.org/FaithFormation