

The Company You Keep

Encouraging Healthy Friendships Among Young People

"Friendship is born at that moment when one person says to another: 'What! You too? I thought I was the only one.'" – C.S. Lewis

One factor remains constant throughout the teen years: teen years are characterized by constant change. According to David Huffaker of Northwestern University, the teen years can be understood as a period of selection, adjustments, and reflection (Nurmi, 2004). Teens experience biological changes, sexual maturation, development of gender roles and socialization while experimenting with identity outside of parents and ways to express individuality. Additionally, young people today are in a society saturated social media, which is an added layer to fun, busy schedules, peer pressure and the potential for bullying or being hurt. During this significantly important rite of passage, the persons youth surround themselves with and/or choose to date have strong impacts on their quality of life.

Friendship adds considerable value and benefits to the lives of teens. Benefits cited by Family Works focus on social skills and character development. The article, "Friendship Is Important to Teens," states that teens develop conflict resolution skills, enjoy more fun and excitement, experience companionship and recreation, talk through issues and problems, learn loyalty, and receive support during times of stress through strong friendships.

The church has a unique role in the faith formation of young people to encourage them to surround themselves with friends who build them up instead of tear them down, with whom they can be authentic, and with whom they feel safe. Amid all the hormonal changes and society pressures, the church has the privilege of reminding young people they are valued because they are a child of God and are beautiful because they are created in God's image. **Youth group and Church may be the only place some young people feel they are free to be their true selves**, while others may feel they can't share the things they did on Saturday with their youth group friends on Sunday. The suggestions below offer ways to discuss healthy body image, friendships, and dating with young people in your group in a way that all may feel comfortable.

Facebook Friends or BFF's?

Discuss the different levels of friendships with young people: friends from school, friends from soccer, Facebook friends they rarely see, who they follow on Twitter, friends from church, etc. During the discussion of friends, ask the following questions:

- When have you been hurt by a misunderstood text, email, or Facebook comment?
- How do you resolve conflicts with friends? (Face to face? Status Update? Text?)
- Who are your closets friends and what do you value about your relationship?
- What does it mean to be a loyal friend and loyal significant other?
- What do you value most about friendship?

Friend or Foe?

Discuss ways friendships are a source of peer pressure and may cause young people to feel uncomfortable, disrespected, or embarrassed. Begin with the following questions, noting that youth may be more comfortable writing their responses than sharing aloud:

- Think back to a time a friend asked you to do something you weren't comfortable doing.
- How did you respond? Are you thankful you responded that way or do you regret your response?
- Have you ever felt embarrassed or hurt by a friend publicly? How did you address them?
- Did an apology and forgiveness occur?
- What do you regret most about one of your friendships or a breakup?
- How do you handle anger, hurt, or regret from a relationship? (Pray? Workout? Talk to a trusted family member?) How do you find peace and reconciliation again?

What Would Jesus Do?

Invite group members to read the following scripture verses aloud to the group. After all have been read, ask group members which one they resonate with most and which one they find to be the most challenging.

- John 15:12-15
- Ephesians 4:29-32
- Colossians 3:12-14
- Romans 12:10
- Luke 6:31
- 1 Corinthians 15:33
- Proverbs 13:20

What are the Risks?

Often the teen years are accompanied by feelings of immortality and the desire to take risks for various reasons, including for the sake of the adrenaline rush itself. View one or more of the following movies as a youth group, either on various nights of youth group or while on a youth trip and ask young people to name the risks involved and their understanding of the potential consequences of said risks. During the movie discussion, it is important to tell young people that determining what risks they are willing to take and which ones they are not, *before they are in the situation*, will greatly help their confidence in their decision-making process. Also note that not all risks are bad, as being a loyal friend often involves positive risks in order to stand up for the good of another person.

- *Coach Carter*
- *Dangerous Minds**
- *Freedom Writers**

- *Hunger Games*
- *Lean On Me*
- *Pay It Forward*
- *Super Bad**
- *Varsity Blues**

**might contain more mature content, scenes, images, or words than some families allow.*

ALWAYS PREVIEW MOVIES BEFORE SHOWING TO A YOUTH GROUP!

Recommended Resources

“A Teen’s Friends are a Powerful Influence” by Valerie Ulene, special to the Los Angeles Times
Teens and Friendships: Parents Still Have Influence – University of Minnesota Extension
Articles.latimes.com/2011/apr/11/health/la-he-the-md-teens-friends-20110411

Gateway: Parenting into the Teen Years, Issue 6, University of Illinois Extension, 2012,
University of Illinois Board of Trustees
FamilyWorks – *“Friendship is Important to Teens”*

Huffaker, D. (2006). *Teen Blogs Exposed: The Private Lives of Teens Made Public*.
Advancement of Science (AAAS) in St. Louis, MO., February, 16-19.
citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.556.1504&rep=rep1&type=pdf

Oxford Journals Medicine, Journal of Pediatric Psychology, Volume 26, Issue 3, Pp. 131-143.

Talking to Teens about Friendship by Denise Witmer
www.verywellfamily.com/talking-to-teens-about-friendship-2610992

“Study Flags Alcohol – Brand References in Youth Music”, Oct. 2011, Lebanon, NH
news.dartmouth.edu/news/2011/10/dartmouth-study-flags-alcohol-brand-references-youth-music

The Friendship Page: Quotes-Proverbs, Global Friendship 1996-2006
friendship.com.au/quotes/quopro.html

YoungWomensHealth.org
www.youngwomenshealth.org/friendship.html

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