

They Are a Child of God, Too When Your Teenager is in Your Youth Group

Let's face it. Having your own child in youth group can be stressful for both the parent and the child. We embarrass them. They horrify us. It may be easy for us to view all members of the youth group as children of God, but when our own child of God is sitting there rolling their eyes or refusing to participate, it's hard to see the situation as a blessing. On the positive side, processing an activity can be much more productive with direct access to a child who has their finger on the pulse of the group. In this case, we must be ready for honesty, critiques, and accolades as they tell us when a program flops or goes well.

As youth advisors who have our own children in the youth group, here are some situations we've encountered that you might encounter as well. We will offer the following advice using a two pronged approach. The issue and the possible response.

Issue: Confidentially

Confidentiality can become tricky! Both we and our teens walk the line of being parent and child as well as youth leader and youth member. Technology has made it easier for us to work in non-traditional places at any time of the day or evening. Teens are more likely to overhear conversations and are acutely aware of our reactions to stressful situations and pastoral care information. Without the confines of an office or typical office hours, we may be unwittingly exposing our own children to information about church members or youth group friends that they do not need to know. We may also find that in conversations with our own children, they share details about other youth group members that we otherwise would not know.

Think about responding like this: *Set boundaries for when work conversations take place in the presence of our own teens, not giving them opportunities to hear privileged information. At home, remember our primary role is parent. When our child shares with us information about a youth group member, empower them to handle the situation as we would with other friends who are not part of the church, unless we feel that a child is in danger. Try not to bring that information into your ministry with that youth group member.*

Issue: Evangelism

Evangelism takes place naturally when a teenager wants to bring friends with them to youth group. Often times, a benefit to having our own teens in youth group is that they want to bring their friends. Good news! Our youth groups will grow! However, there may come a time when our children's group of friends change the youth group dynamic. Watch for this and create situations to help new friends get to know the whole youth group rather than allowing a clique to form. Another consideration for those of us leading the youth program—what happens when our teen can't come to youth group?

Think about responding like this: *Although we may be held to a different standard of participation in church activities as employees or committed volunteers, our teens cannot always be held to that same standard. In our own households we must set guidelines for our teen's participation in activities at the church, as well as at school and in the community. Our standard may be very different from those who do not work at the church. But this needs to be a family decision rather than a mandate because of other people's expectations. When bringing friends with them to church, our rules and expectations for good behavior should not differ from what we expect outside the church walls or from any member of our church family.*

Issue: Favoritism

Favoritism becomes an issue when our youth enter the program. In an effort to not favor our own children, we often go overboard and ignore their raised hands or offers to provide leadership. Our children bear the brunt of our role as leaders. No matter how hard we try to be neutral, our own children may have an unsatisfactory experience in the group. They may feel dismissed, while others will cry out that our child is being favored. Sometimes this dynamic leads to a dislike of our own children by others, and vice versa.

Think about responding like this: *It's only seven years . . . hang in there! Be sure to have plenty of other adults to be part of the youth program so that our children have a youth advisor as a mentor/friend that is not us. Assign one of these adults to be responsible for our teen's discussion group. When possible, do not teach their Sunday school class, Bible study, or go on their trip. It is important to give them space to grow in their faith, by having experiences without mom or dad keynoting, chaperoning, or teaching their lesson. Share the wealth of leadership by randomly assigning youth to be in charge or have youth sign up to lead so that everyone has an equal opportunity. Don't be afraid to reprimand our teen when appropriate, but try to do so in the same way we would for any of the young people in the group. Also, be sure to celebrate accomplishments of our children in the same manner we would with other youth.*

Issue: Leadership and Competing Leadership

Our children, who have grown up being at every program that we run and watching us organize and facilitate them, can often be quite adept at leading activities. This is wonderful for the church! But this can put us at odds with our children and make them feel as though they are competing with us.

Think about responding like this: *Find ways for them to offer leadership at appropriate times. If opportunities arise, step back and watch our youth shine! They really have honed their leadership skills, whether it is leading a game or teaching a Bible study. We need to give them opportunities for sharing their gifts, just as we would allow others to do. Try allowing them to sit on committees where we are not the assigned staff person or to be part of the presbytery/denominational youth leadership.*

Issue: Expected Perfectionism

Picture perfect? The expectations for us as youth leaders are high, and we are often held up as experts in working with adolescents and models when it comes to parenting our own teens. We cannot always be the picture of perfection as a family. We will make mistakes as parents while we are at church, as will our children. They will goof off during worship or ruin the carpet in the parlor or talk back to the Sunday school teacher just like many of the other youth. We will be expected to react differently because we are paid staff or volunteer regularly at church, but we cannot expect our children to react in any other way that is developmentally appropriate. So, how do we react when our kids mess up?

Think about responding like this: *When we are parenting our children at church, we need to try as often as possible to do that privately and maintain the same set of rules and consequences as we have at home. When we are reacting to an event or situation that occurs during youth programs, and reacting as the youth leader, we cannot punish our child more harshly. The youth group rules and expectations should be set for all teenagers. Because we are front and center with the youth, many parents will come to us for advice with their teens. Be honest about what works and what doesn't. This may help the congregation see that many families struggle through the adolescent years. Also look for other examples to use instead of our own children. This places other parents as good role models, as well as takes the pressure off our own children so that their lives are not publicly scrutinized.*

Issue: Remembering you are not alone!

Response: Pray

Prayer: Again and again we come to you asking for forgiveness God. But today we come with grateful hearts, giving thanks for our children and the privilege of being a parent. As you must struggle with your children's choices and actions, be with us when we don't speak the right words or give the best example of living faithfully. Grant us patience and grace as we navigate working with our children in the midst of our congregations. Help us to laugh at their jokes, recognize their worries, and incorporate their gifts. We ask that you also help our children be patient with us. We will make mistakes. We need their mercy, as much as they need our grace. Help us to offer this as freely to one another as you do to us. Amen.

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