

Back to School Kick-Off Event Ideas

It's always fun to start the new school year and youth group year with a special event. The benefits of a kick-off event may include:

- Welcoming the youngest grade of new youth into your group
- Reconnecting after a summer of travel and play
- Including parents during a portion of the event to share an overview of the plans for the upcoming youth group year and let them connect with each other
- Introducing new youth advisors to the group
- Group building by spending a couple of hours or more together engaging in an intentional fun event.

The ideas listed below can be a kick-off during your normal youth group time, a special block of time on the weekend, or as part of a lock-in, retreat, or campout. An overnight experience usually allows the time together needed for new group formation. A couple of hours together provides your group with substantial community building time. Choose what is best for your group and your community's schedule.

The Classics

Classics are "classic" because they have a proven track record: they engage youth year after year, and they fit a variety of programs and communities.

Progressive Dinner—Invite three church members to host appetizers, a dinner entrée, or dessert. If walking, the three homes should be within one mile of each other; if you have transportation, the homes should be within a ten-minute drive of each other. If the homes are families of youth, often the youth that live there feel a sense of pride hosting the group, and including a new, younger youth family is a great way to connect with the youngest new participants. Another idea is to use non-youth homes, so youth connect with other members in the congregation. Plan for this to be a two-hour event including travel. Spend 30 minutes at the first two homes for appetizers and an entrée, and plan for an hour at the third home for dessert. Invite parents to join the group for dessert. Consider hosting a quick name game at the first home, simply eat at the second home, and play a fun game and/or share information about youth group plans for the upcoming year at the dessert home where the parents join the group. (If your youth group is too big to fit into one home, you can do two tracks by dividing the youth group and then come together for dessert at the same location, which could be a home or a park.)

Pool Party—Find a youth parent, a church member, or a local public pool with party rental options, and host a classic fun pool party and cookout. Invite parents to join in the fun for the last 30 minutes of the event so the youth have their own space for most of the event, but the parents may return to connect over dessert. One idea to provide food would be for the church or host to provide the main dishes and ask parents to provide a side dish or dessert. Lead a few structured pool games for fun and group building like “Sharks and Minnows.” Instructions are available at wikihow.com/Play-Sharks-and-Minnnows.

Scavenger Hunt—If you have a safe walkable area in your town, community scavenger hunts are great for youth to work together creatively. Be sure to place at least two adults (preferably youth advisors for the school year) in each scavenger hunt group. You can form groups anyway you like; one suggestion is for a younger youth team and older youth team. A way to include parents in this activity is to have a “parent only” team so they can get to know each other better too. For more ideas online, go to pinterest.com/cat6745/scavenger-hunt-ideas/.

Low/High Ropes Course—Many local camps offer facilitators to lead groups through a series of team-building exercises on low and/or high ropes courses. Low ropes offer challenges and intentional team-building activities. High ropes offer continued challenges for individuals as the youth group supports and cheers them on while experiencing these challenges alongside one another. It’s a great way to work together and connect this experience to how they will become a team within the youth group over the coming school year.

Activity Parks—There are some recreational places that are classic fun for all ages. Often activity parks provide party packages including dinner, drinks, and recreational activities such as putt-putt golf, go-karts, bowling, or bumper boats. Your group might also visit a theme park if you live close to one.

New Ideas

5K for Charity—5K walks/runs with cool themes are popping up all over the place and are often raising money for charities. See if there are any in your area during the time frame of your kick-off and go walk/run as a youth group. Some 5Ks have inflatables interspersed, some have zombies chasing you, and some spray you with color paint. Another idea is to pick a 5K that has a charity that connects closely to your youth group: for example, a pediatric cancer center or a local animal shelter. It’s healthy, fun, and allows youth to give back!

Escape Room—Many areas now have a new activity called an “Escape Room.” This activity has your group locked in a room with a series of puzzles or problems to solve in a set time limit to escape the room. This is a fun way to have the group work together! Most venues cap the group size around 12 people. If your group is larger, you might need to have two sessions, starting one group with food or dessert before doing the Escape Room and then switch. However, many places have several rooms available and can have multiple groups going at one time.

Cooking Competition—A fun way to have your youth work together is a cooking competition. Television shows like Cupcake Wars, Chopped, and Iron Chef might inspire a theme for your cooking competition. Two ideas would be a dessert competition or a pizza-making competition. Provide all the ingredients, cooking space, rules, and adults for each team. It will be important to use the food with care and eat it together at the end of the competition to limit food waste. Have parents, youth advisors, or other church member serve as a panel of judges with different categories of winners. One way to include parents is to have them participate together as a team to rival the youth.

Newer Activity Parks—There are cool new recreational activity venues popping up that offer party packages including dinner, drinks, and recreational activities. Some examples to check for in your area are a trampoline park, Whirlyball, rock climbing gym, bubble soccer, or American Ninja Warrior Junior Obstacle Gym.

You might also enjoy using the following Quicksheets that are related to back to school and youth group planning for the year:

Quicksheet #39—A Time to Celebrate: Back to School in the Church

www.presbyterianmission.org/resource/quicksheet-39-time-to-celebrate-back-to-school-you

Quicksheet #43— Around the Corner: 10 Places to Go with Young People in Your Community

www.presbyterianmission.org/resource/quicksheet-43-around-the-corner-youth

Quicksheet #47— Get Your Youth Planning: Youth Group with Presby Land

www.presbyterianmission.org/resource/quicksheet-47-get-your-youth-planning

Quicksheet #49—New Year, New Opening Night Ideas

www.presbyterianmission.org/resource/quicksheet-49-new-year-new-opening-night-ideas

Quicksheet #53—Engaging with Young People (*Great for Leader Training!*)

www.presbyterianmission.org/resource/quicksheet-53-engaging-young-people

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