

6 TIPS FOR COMMUNICATING WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

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The following story was written by a member of the Youth For Christ USA Cities Pursuit Community. These are real stories and pieces showing how God is using YFC USA as a vehicle in raising up life-long followers of Jesus all across the nation.

Communicating with a young person can be intimidating. While it may be challenging to connect with a young person, it is worth the effort. The young person years are often one of the loneliest times in a person's life. Young people often describe feeling lonely even when they have a large friend group. They need a caring adult to talk to - whether they realize it or not. Below are six tips to help develop great communication with the young people in your life.

1. Be Yourself

Anyone who works with young people regularly knows that they have a sixth sense for recognizing when adults are being phony. They don't care if you know the music they listen to, dress in the latest fashions, or use their slang - they care if you are being authentic. Just be you. Some of the most beautiful relationships have developed between young people and adults who are radically different from them. You don't have to be "cool" or "hip" to work with kids, you just have to genuinely care about them. It may help to check out Wikipedia for slang terms so you can understand them better or to listen to some of the music they like to demonstrate your interest in them but you don't have to try and take on a different identity. So, don't show up wearing skinny jeans or a grill when you normally wear khaki's and a button-up... they will know instantly and you will just end up uncomfortable.

2. Listen more than you speak

Young people have a bad rep for not talking very much, but as adults we have a tendency to do most of the talking ourselves. When sitting down with a young person, try and rid your mind of any distractions or expectations. Just simply listen to what they have to say and ask simple open-ended questions like, "What do you like most about playing football?" or clarifying questions like, "So, you have two brothers younger than you, is that right?" Try to avoid asking lots of close-ended questions like, "How old are you? Where did you grow up? How many siblings do you have?" This begins to feel more like an interrogation than a conversation. Instead, use the open-ended approach, "Tell me what it was like growing up." Now, they will speak longer, will share a lot of the information you were going to ask for and may share even more.

Next, you want to reflect back to them what they have told you by paraphrasing what they've said, (ex: "So you really enjoy playing football but have a tough time keeping your grades up to be allowed to play.") This lets them know you are paying attention and can help ensure you understood them correctly. Try to keep them talking about what interests them and focus on

listening and reflecting. Once you have developed trust, you can begin to ask questions like, "How are you doing lately? Is there anything you'd like to talk about?" This gives them permission to share deeper things that they may want to talk about. Don't push, though. They need to trust you first.

3. Validate feelings

After developing rapport with a young person, they may begin to share more personal things with you. When a young person shares that they are angry, sad, lonely, etc. It is very important to validate their feelings - even if what they are upset about does not seem like that big of a deal to you. As adults, we have learned that "time heals all wounds" and that things happened for a reason. But developmentally, young people do not have the capacity to "see the bigger picture" or to adopt your perspective on things. What they are feeling is very real to them whether it is a big deal in reality or not. Simple statements like, "I'm sorry you are having to deal with that" or "That must be really tough" are often all a young person needs to feel heard and validated. When we say, "It's not that big of a deal" a young person may feel misunderstood and may assume you are either are tired of hearing about their problems or like you just want them to stop talking - and that is the last thing we want.

4. Show empathy appropriately

Showing empathy is important. Like validation it lets the young person know that you care about what they are going through. Empathy takes it a step further experience the pain with them. You can show empathy appropriately by patting them on the shoulder, offering a hug, or showing through your body language how much you feel for them.

Sometimes adults have a tendency to over-empathize with a young person. If a young person shares something that is shocking our first reaction may be to gasp and say how horrible it is and start asking lots of emotionally charged questions like, "who did this!" While the intent is good, over-reacting to the situation will only cause the young person to feel more anxious and may wish they hadn't said anything.

Another way adults can over-empathize is when they have experienced something similar to what the young person is describing and instead of continuing to listen and help the young person process their emotions, the adult tells the young person all of the details of what happened to them. When this happens the young person may stop talking because you have made the conversation about you or they may feel as though what they've been through is small compared to what you've gone through and feel guilty for sharing.

It can be helpful if you have experienced something similar, but instead of sharing your whole story, simply use your experience to help guide the conversation. For example, if you grew up with an alcoholic parent you would know the nervous feeling of wondering if they were going to come home drunk or sober. Instead of sharing your experience you can simply ask, "Do you ever feel nervous because you never know if they will come home drunk or sober?" This will prompt a response and allow the young person to process those emotions and feel comfortable sharing more.

5. Focus on positives

Believe it or not, most young people know their shortcomings very well. They also know the risks of their behavior and what is likely to happen to them if they continue down the wrong path. At times this education may be necessary, but for the most part they know this. If you are working with a young person with behavioral issues, try focusing on positives instead of negatives. When you spend your time discussing all of the bad things they've done and all of the bad that could happen, after the conversation that is what they will focus on. That may not sound like a bad thing but what we think about most tends to be the direction we go in.

So, instead of focusing on the negative, be sure to spend plenty of time acknowledging and affirming them for the good things they are doing, a special talent they have - anything you can think of that is positive. Also, talk about realistic steps they can take to help them towards a future goal. Talk often about what they can achieve and how God has created them with and for a purpose. Then when they leave the conversation they will be focused on the positive - a great motivator. Instead of feeling weighed down and fearful, they will feel uplifted and hopeful.

6. Help them find solutions

Here is my last tip about communicating with young people. Resist the urge to become Mr./Mrs. Fixit. When a young person shares a problem with you they want to share their feelings and explore the problem with you. When you are too quick to jump in with a solution they may feel as though they are a problem that you just want to fix so you don't have to listen to them anymore. Beyond that, they will miss the opportunity to practice problem solving. We don't want the young people we work with to develop a dependency on us - we want them to mature to a point where they no longer need us for every problem. So, resist the urge to constantly dispense advice and ask them questions like, "what do you think you should do?" or "That's tough, have you thought of what a solution might be?" Help them walk through the process, encouraging them and helping to direct them. The best possible outcome is that they learn to solve problems on their own. Only offer advice if they specifically ask for it, or you if they'd like your opinion. Even then, try and take them through the process of finding a solution with you.

We encourage you to put these six tips into practice and continue to learn more about developing great communication and deeper relationships with the young people in your life. It takes practice but will soon become second nature. Let's close with the greatest wisdom we can receive, scripture. *"Whoever restrains his words has knowledge, and he who has a cool spirit is a man of understanding"* Proverbs 17:27.

Tera Swigart

is the Community Engagement Coordinator for YFC Houston and has worked with youth in the Juvenile Justice System since 1999. She is also the founder/Editor-in-Chief for FRUIT magazine distributed throughout Texas to youth within Juvenile Justice facilities, community centers, churches, and to individuals.