

Developing an Effective Youth Ministry
When Considering Developmental Issues

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When developing a ministry it is vital to understand the needs of the people for which the ministry is designed. In order to reach teenagers it is vital to be relevant to their unique developmental needs. Adolescence is a time of great change emotionally, cognitively, physically, socially and spiritually. James Marcia said that adolescents go through a “moratorium” in which they search for an identity (Rice, 1999). This searching for an identity reaches across the different areas of their lives. If the modern day church desires to appeal to adolescents they must understand how to develop unique ministry opportunities that help adolescents form a strong sense of self-identity through social and spiritual means. In order to effectively influence adolescents youth ministries must: 1) understand the importance of aiding teenagers in forming a self-identity 2) realize the influence of interpersonal relationships and 3) know how to effectively foster spiritual maturation.

Self-identity

“Achieving a sense of identity is the major developmental task of teenagers” (Parrot, 2000; p.17). Unfortunately not all adolescents successfully form a healthy sense of self. The lack of a self-identity causes adolescents to alter their behavior according to whom they are around. This type of behavior can last well into adult years and can cause individuals to live their lives “without the security of personal identity” (Parrot; p. 18). Erickson called this state of being identity diffusion (Rice, 1999). Individuals who are not able to form a solid self-identity are not comfortable with who they are and therefore they change their value system constantly, which causes anxiety.

Erik Erickson said that adolescents need the following three things to help them solidify their self-identity: acceptance, values and time. Acceptance from others is important

because adolescents struggle with self-acceptance. Teenagers are usually overly critical of themselves since they expect to live up to the standards of their “ideal self.” The ideal self sets adolescents up for failure because there is no way the “real self” can meet the standards of the “ideal self.” When the gap between the “ideal self” and the “real self” is too big anxiety develops. Youth ministries can be a great source of acceptance where teenagers are affirmed despite their failures in reaching the standards of their ideal self (Forsyth, 1997). Youth ministries should also be a place where cliques do exist. Erickson believed that cliques are a defense mechanism against identity confusion. If adolescents are accepted by others and empowered to understand who they are in Christ then they will not have the need to form cliques. Instead they will be equipped to reach their peers with the unconditional love of God. Another reason acceptance is so important in the forming of adolescents’ self-identity is because teenagers receive their sense of self from how others view them. James Fowler (1996; p. 61) summarized the importance of adolescents’ peers on the formation of their identity by the following quote from a teenager’s point of view, “I see you seeing me; I see the me I think you see.” Without a stable sense of self, adolescents will become confused about their role in society (identity confusion). This “role confusion” can cause adolescents to act out immorally because it is a hazard of not discovering one’s self-identity (Forsyth). Youth pastors have a great opportunity to provide a place where adolescents are accepted and therefore have the tools necessary to develop a strong sense of self.

When addressing the importance of developing values in order to solidify one’s self-identity Erickson said, “One’s identity is reflected in one’s deepest convictions” (as cited in Forsyth; p. 42). It is important for youth pastors to understand that the only way adolescents will be able to reach identity achievement is if their beliefs are solidified so that they can be

committed to their value system. Since teenagers are not cognitively capable of critically thinking about their belief system they look to others to help them form their value system. Modeling behavior of people they admire often helps form adolescents' self-identity. Because adolescents look to others for their belief system it is vitally important that a youth ministry provides solid adult leadership that can set solid godly examples for teenagers to emulate.

The third component that Erickson said was necessary in order for adolescents to form a self-identity is time. Teenagers need "a span of time after they have ceased being children but before their deeds and works count toward a future identity" (Erickson as cited in Forsyth; p. 43). This time span that Erickson addressed has been labeled identity moratorium (Rice, 1999). During identity moratorium adolescents strive to reach identity achievement. Identity achievement is reached when the individual has "resolved his identity crisis by carefully evaluating various alternative and choices, and has come to conclusions and decisions on his own" (Rice; p. 186). If the proper amount of time is not given to teenagers during their identity moratorium then they will make commitments even though they have not undergone sufficient identity crises. James Marcia called this premature commitment identity foreclosure. The reason identity moratorium is so important is because it gives adolescents a period in their life where they can explore different value systems. This time of exploration allows teenagers to be able to thoughtfully commit to an identity with which they are comfortable. Therefore, youth ministries should provide a safe haven where adolescents are allowed and encouraged to critically explore the belief system to which they want to commit. This does not mean that religious tolerance should be taught, but youth ministries should challenge their students' rationale as to why they believe the way they do. If students are not

challenged to understand why they believe the way they do then they will be stuck in identity foreclosure throughout their lifetime. Without critically addressing their belief system adolescents will enter adulthood without a solid value system in place. Youth pastors should challenge their students to understand why they believe the way they do. This will cause the adolescents to internalize their faith and also lead them into forming a strong sense of self.

Interpersonal Relationships

The many different changes that adolescents undergo do not only effect their self-identity, but they also influence the way they interact with others. Parent and peer relationships are the most important relationships teenagers have. Teenagers do not spend as much time with their parents as they did when they were children, but parents still have a great influence on their adolescent's life. Adolescents are also greatly influenced by their peers. The different ways adolescents interact with others are not always easy to adjust to and this can cause conflict within families. Youth ministries have the opportunity to educate parents as well as teenagers on how to have healthy relationships during the changes that occur during adolescents.

Parents. Mark Twain summarized the struggles that parents and teenagers have when he said, "When I was seven my father knew everything. When I was fourteen my father knew nothing. But when I was twenty-one I was amazed how much the old man had learned in just seven years" (as cited in Parrot, 2000; p. 300). The fact that teenagers and their parents experience conflicts is not a secret, but often the severity of the conflicts can be lessened if both parties try to understand from where the other is coming. It makes sense that parents and their adolescent children should have some conflicts. Parents and teenagers are from two different generations and because of that they have different points of view. It is vitally

important that parents learn to communicate with their teenagers in order to promote healthy family relationships. Youth ministries should focus on educating both parents and adolescents in order to help them work through struggles that take place within families. The less family conflicts that arise, the more comfortably adolescents will be able to experience their teenage years.

The primary reason teenagers have conflicts with their parents is because of the lack of communication skills. Parents must attempt to understand why their teenagers act the way they do and teenagers must try to understand why their parents do the things they do. Some of the areas that are most conflicted in parent-child relationships are the adolescent's social life, responsibilities, school performance, family relationships and morals (Parrott, 2000). The reason parents have such a problem with their adolescent's social life is because of the amount of time that is spent with peers. When children are young the majority of their time is spent with family. However, the natural push towards autonomy causes teenagers to spend more time with their peers than with their parents. Youth ministries must be able to help parents understand that the lack of time they spend with their teenager is natural. Parents can make their adolescents push for autonomy easier if they sit down and discuss guidelines that should be put in place in order to protect their teenagers and help them have healthy peer relationships. Responsibility is also an area of concern for parents. Teenagers want independence, but they are not always ready and willing to be responsible. Youth pastors can be very helpful in teaching teenagers the importance of being responsible. The more responsibility adolescents are able to obtain, the more parents will trust them. The greatest concern, and often the greatest point of conflict, is parents' concerns for the moral behavior of their adolescents. Parents know that most teenagers are not equipped to make life-changing

decisions, therefore parents feel they must force certain morals on their children. However, by forcing certain values upon their adolescent children parents usually cause rebellion.

Youth ministries can team up with parents to help teach Christian values as well as provide safe places for adolescents to experience healthy peer relationships.

Youth pastors must also be aware of the fact that some adolescents are not able to have healthy relationships with their parents because their parents are either absent from the home or are not emotionally connected to their children. In these difficult situations youth pastors must be able and willing to try to help fill the void that is left in adolescents' lives by divorced or emotionally distant parents. Too often adolescents who seek love and acceptance from their parents turn to gangs, other negative peer groups or drugs in order to find acceptance. A male adolescent who was involved in gang activity said, "If I could find love at home...you know...if my dad didn't beat the (expletive) out of me all the time I wouldn't have to join a gang. My gang is the only people that show me love." Another male adolescent who was involved with drugs said about the people with whom he used, "They are like a family to me." There is no way youth ministries can take the place of families, but they must be a friend and supporter of the family unit. Youth ministries need to provide opportunities for the family to grow so they can function properly, which will lead to the healthy development of adolescents.

Peers. As children move into their teenage years "The role of peers as a source of activities, support, and influence increases greatly" (Berndt & Savin-Williams as cited in Dacey & Kenny, 1997; p. 254). Peer groups are necessary in order for adolescents to develop properly. Peer groups are responsible for helping teens deal with their problems. By interacting with peers, adolescents learn how to resolve conflicts by observing others and by

learning assertiveness skills (Dacey & Kenney). Peer groups also give emotional and social support to teenagers. Friends give support to adolescents and because of the support adolescents receive from peers they are able to become more independent of their parents (Dacey & Kenney). Adolescents' development of social and communication skills are dependent upon the adolescents' involvement with their peer group. As adolescents interact with their peers they are able to learn how to express their feelings and how to be involved in relationships outside of their family (Dacey & Kenny). Peer groups also help solidify the morals that adolescents possess. Adolescents act out the values they were taught by their parents and the reaction they get from their peers shapes their morals (Dacey & Kenny). The strengthening of adolescents' self-esteem is also a very important role of peer groups. "Being liked by a large number of peers helps adolescents feel good about themselves" (Dacey & Kenny; p. 257). The previously mentioned roles that peer groups play are very important. If an adolescent's peer group has a negative influence on him, then he will be lacking in certain developmental areas. Adolescence is a journey that can become very lonely and difficult if not accompanied by peers who give support. The importance of peer support can be seen in the following quote by a teenager who described his adolescent years as "a long dark tunnel with many twists and turns and a narrow exit" (Hersch, 1998; p. 51). Youth ministries must recognize the important role that peer groups play in the development of adolescents. It is vital that youth ministries provide a safe place for adolescents to develop healthy relationships with their peers.

Spirituality

Since humans are holistic beings all areas must be addressed when considering development. Spirituality is a very important part of adolescent development and the church

has the ability to influence teenagers' relationships with God. The most important factor in the church's ability to influence teenagers is its ability to be relevant. If the church is not relevant then adolescents will rebel against the teachings and influences of the church.

As adolescents undergo cognitive changes they begin to experience their spiritual beliefs differently. The reason for this is because spiritual development is limited by individuals' ability to grasp abstract concepts. According to James Forsyth, "Authentic human development is the natural foundation for authentic religious growth and the life of faith" (1997, p. 4). As adolescents begin to experience their spirituality differently it is vitally important that youth ministries guide them in ways that are relevant to their developmental needs. According to Piaget, the only way people develop is if they are in a state of disequilibrium because they will have to change in order to reach a state of stability. Therefore, adolescents must have their beliefs challenged in order for them to mature spiritually. The only way teenagers will internalize their beliefs is if they are made to think critically about them. If adolescents do not internalize their beliefs then they will reach identity foreclosure in their spiritual development. Youth ministries can help their students strive for identity achievement in their spiritual development if they are properly challenged and taught. Unfortunately the church world is scared of questioning their traditional belief systems and all that does is cause adolescents to be stuck in a state of identity diffusion concerning their spiritual development. Youth ministries should not be afraid of teenagers doubting their faith because this can mean they are searching for a state of stability amongst the disequilibrium that they are experiencing. By seriously searching for answers adolescents are able to internalize their faith and therefore achieve a state of identity achievement in their spiritual development. W. H. Clark (as cited in Gorsuch, Hood, Hunsberger, & Spilka, 1996;

p. 93) said, "People differ in their estimate of the value of doubt. The official church attitude is that it is to be deplored as an obstacle to faith, at the worst a temptation of the Devil, at best a sign of weakness." Youth ministries should help provide adolescents with a solid foundation upon which they can critically reflect on their beliefs and therefore be strengthened in their faith.

As adolescents begin to change the way they relate to their parents they also change with the way they relate to God. God is no longer seen as a superior being floating around the cosmos but he is viewed as "being on a journey them" (Forsyth, 1997; p. 45). Adolescents gain the ability to form deeper relationships with others and this transfers to their relationship with God. Youth ministries must be relevant to the developmental needs of adolescents. Therefore they must begin to teach their students relationally. By teaching relationally youth pastors allow students to see God as the loving and caring father that he is instead of a god who is intent on punishing everyone who makes mistakes. Adolescents begin to have the ability to understand God's love and grace, but they will only understand it if youth pastors challenge the adolescents' previous ways of thinking. One of the ways to help teenagers understand God's characteristics is to help impart biblical knowledge in their lives. Studies have shown that the more knowledge adolescents have concerning their spiritual beliefs, then the more likely they are to remain committed to their belief system (Gorsuch, Hood, Husberger, & Spilka, 1996). Therefore, youth ministries must be committed to training their students and promoting biblical discipleship. If adolescents understand the God they are trying to relate to then they are more likely to remain faithful to him.

In order to effectively minister to adolescents it is necessary to understand the developmental needs with which they present. The drastic physical, cognitive, emotional,

spiritual and social changes that adolescents undergo can cause their development to be what G. Stanley Hall called a time of “storm and stress.” However, an effective youth ministry that is relevant to the developmental needs of adolescents can partner with parents in reducing the amount of stress adolescents experience. The church should be a place that encourages growth, not a place where teenagers are taught to follow rules out of blind obedience. Youth ministries have an awesome opportunity and responsibility to impact adolescents in their crucial development years. In order for the church to fulfill its purpose youth ministries must understand how to be relevant and meet the developmental needs of adolescents.

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