

Hospitality

by Patrick Drury

Create a Culture of Inclusiveness

One of the most important characteristics of a successful youth ministry program is an environment in which everybody feels welcome. In order to bring teens closer to Christ, they have to stick around long enough to hear our message. Once they come in the door, it's our job to keep them there and to ensure they want to come back. If we can help them feel a sense of belonging and community, the hardest part is behind us.

Get Everybody Involved

The Director of Youth Ministry cannot be the only person working to create a welcoming environment. Every adult volunteer and every student leader needs to do their part as well. The more that people focus on welcoming and including others, the more successful they will become at it. With everybody pitching in, new students will quickly see that your ministry is an inviting and comfortable place to spend time. And as those new students become veterans in your ministry, they will do their part to perpetuate that culture of inclusiveness.

Little Things Matter... A Lot

Young people are incredibly attentive to their environment and to the people around them. They will remember things that you say or do, even when *you* do not. They will remember how they are treated the first time they attend an activity in your program. They will remember how the other teens act toward one another. They will remember whether or not people make an effort to welcome and include them. That is why we need to pay attention to the small stuff, because it really can make a big difference in the impression we give to young people.



Practical Applications: Engaging Newcomers

1. Say hello to every new face that walks through the door, make eye contact, and smile.
2. Introduce yourself. If you cannot remember whether or not you met them already, introduce yourself anyways. It is always better to over-introduce than under-introduce.
3. Talk to them. Small talk can be incredibly helpful in making connections with teens. Find out any information that might help you welcome them or connect them with somebody else (like the school they attend, sports they play, extracurriculars they participate in, etc).
4. Introduce them to other people. Ideally you can connect them with other students that share something in common with them.
5. Give them space. After your initial conversation has come to a natural close, it's okay to leave them alone and move on to other people. We do not want to smother anybody and scare them off.
6. Encourage veteran students to approach newcomers, without being obvious that you are doing so. Often new students will feel more welcomed if their peers make an effort, so enlist the help of teens who have been involved in your program for a while. Be subtle.
7. Welcome newcomers in your large group setting. Typically this involves cheering and fanfare. If appropriate, have the new person/people introduce themselves to the group (but only if they are willing—some people are too shy).



Practical Applications: Inclusion

1. Name tags are a simple way to help people get to know one another. Use them often.
2. Pay attention to the dynamics of your group and be on the lookout for any individuals who are by themselves or on the exterior. Reach out to them, or enlist other adults or students to do so.
3. Open up conversation huddles to include people nearby. Many times when people get to talking, they naturally form a circle. Other people will not be able to join in the conversation unless somebody makes room for them.
4. Explain inside jokes. It is easy to feel left out if you do not understand what the group is talking about. A brief explanation of background info will help people feel included, even if they weren't there in the first place.
5. Icebreakers are an excellent tool to get people interacting in ways they would not otherwise. Mixers can split up cliques, connect people with one another, and help students meet new people and build community.
6. Small group discussions are another way to get people interacting with one another. Mix groups up as much as possible and keep them small in size. Have facilitators concentrate on getting the group to talk to each other.



Practical Applications: When Newcomers Return

1. Greet them, make eye contact, and smile. Let them know you are glad they came back.
2. Remember names! It seems like a small thing, but it is really a big deal. I still remember situations in high school and college when people remembered my name.
3. Ask them questions about the information you learned before (like “How is basketball/the play/band/your shrunken head collection?”). Remembering details about their life shows them that you care.
4. Re-introduce them to people. Again, it is always better to over-introduce than under-introduce.

Be Yourself

The best way to make people feel at ease is simply to be yourself. If you are comfortable, the young people around you will be comfortable. Share with them who you are, and they will be more willing to do the same. And they will be more willing to be themselves around the other students in your ministry program. Now what is more welcoming than that?

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