

COUNSELING AND CONVERSING WITH KIDS.

A. Ministry of affirmation.

Most kids' destructive actions are in reaction to a negative self-image. Affirming kids for their God-given dignity and special gifts is a primary task of effective youth ministry.

1. Develop faith vision or grace vision. Be able to see in even the worst kid the original purpose and call of God.
 - Jesus saw in Simon “the rock man” Peter.
 - God wants us to “call out” the special purpose and destiny in “throw away” kids.
2. Be liberal with your praise.
 - Most feedback kids get is negative.
 - Be creative in finding ways to affirm kids, but make sure that the praise and affirmation is accurate and warranted.
3. Balance praise with occasional constructive criticism.
 - Constant praise without any constructive criticism leads to unreality and lessens the positive benefit of praise.
 - If there is too much criticism the youth will grow disheartened and quit.

B. How to have a conversation with a kid.

1. Learn to listen.

Your success depends more upon your ability or willingness to really listen than upon any other single factor.

 - True listening requires concentration and hard work.
 - Don't be thinking about what you will say next.
 - Watch carefully both verbal and non-verbal clues.
 - Ask, “What is he/she really saying?”

- True listening is a high form of flattery that a kid rarely gets anywhere else.
- True listening involves communicating back through posture, eye contact and relevant rephrasing or questions that we are hearing. (More on this later.)

2. Try to hear what is behind the questions.

Key: Most of their attitudes are meant to probe attitudes rather than gather information.

Example: Kid asks, “What do you think of my music/clothes?”

Possible underlying question:

Do you like me?

Are you someone I can talk to?

Do you have an open mind?

Can I trust you?

Do you have morals and values?

Are you someone I can explore different possibilities with?

Will you give me helpful, useful feedback – rather than preach?

3. Since much of their behavior and questions or statements are meant to test you rather than gather information, in your responses move from:

- Event to relationship
 - Reaffirm the relationship before you answer the question; i.e., “That’s one thing I really like about you, you are not afraid of hard questions, now, about what you said...”
- Event to feeling
 - Freely share how you felt in reaction to their action or statement, help them to probe their feelings; i.e., “I’m wondering what you were feeling when you said/did that.”

4. As adults it is easy to fall into certain patterns of communicating with kids that are almost always self-defeating.

- Threats and warnings.

i.e., “If you ever talk to your mother like that again young man, you’ll be sorry you ever saw the light of day.”

These serve as an unnecessary challenge to kids’ autonomy and breed resentment because they are coerced. It is better to take a positive disciplinary move.

- Bribes

Actually reinforces non-cooperation since in the end, it pays.

- Sarcasm

i.e., “Well, for someone who knows everything there is to know and never needs to listen to anyone, you sure came running pretty quick for help.”

Never productive. Demeans people and simply puts them in an antagonistic mood.

- Long sermons and lectures

i.e., “I can’t believe you lied to me. That’s what’s wrong with the world today; everyone is too self-centered to stand by their word. If I can’t take you at your word then... etc.”

- Overuse leads to tune-out.
- Lectures tend to be moralistic generalizing rather than really probing the unique motives, feelings, actions and consequences of the particular event.

- Talking down

i.e., “I certainly would think by now I wouldn’t have to explain such an obvious fact to you... etc.

- Destroys the chance to learn from mistakes since the issue now is protecting myself from attack.

- Prophesying

i.e., “You’ll never amount to much at this rate.”

- Reinforces negative self concept.

5. Respond in such a way to help them develop a sense of responsibility and self-awareness and develop inner values.

Help them to examine what they are thinking and feeling inwardly rather than simply reacting to their outward behavior.

- Help reflect back their feelings.
 - “You sound angry”
 - “Do you know what you are angry about?”
 - “I’m wondering why you responded the way you did? What were you hoping would happen when you said...”
- Our goal is to help kids understand and evaluate what they are thinking and feeling inside and look at it critically in the light of Biblical teaching as well as their goals and desires.

C. Starting up a conversation

Remember: kids are like everyone else. Almost all people like to talk about themselves. They are flattered by and drawn to people who are interested in themselves.

To initiate a conversation, ask:

- What school do you go to?
- What is your favorite subject, teacher, etc.? Why?
- Do you play sports? Which one? Why is it your favorite?
- I like your top, where do you shop?
- What’s your favorite T.V. show? Why?
- Do you have any hobbies? What is your favorite part about your hobby?
- Do you have any brothers and sisters? Older and younger? What do they do, etc.?

D. Extending the conversation. Helping kids to tell their story. Use the following forms of communication to invite kids to continue talking:

- Extension:

A request for further information based on something already said. “What happened after that?” “How did you feel when he said that?”

- Echo:

Nearly exact repetition of the kid’s words. Maybe with a note of surprise in your voice.

- Kid: “Then I kicked my little brother down the stairs!”

- You: “You kicked your little brother down the stairs?!”

- Summary:

Summarize the information just given and ask for confirmation.

- “You’re saying then that you feel that your parents don’t try to understand you and that’s the reason you won’t listen to them.”

- Clarification:

Ask for more information on some vague point.

- “How could you tell she really liked you?” What did you mean when you said...?”

- Confrontation:

- Confront the kid with an inconsistency between something he just said and something he said earlier. “Now wait a minute...”

E. Phrasing the best question.

Think about how you phrase questions so that they give the kid the greatest range to really express what they think.

- Open versus closed questions.

- “How did you feel after the game?” (open)

- “You felt great after the game, didn’t you?” (closed)

- “You like school, don’t you?”
 “Do you like school?”
 “Some people like school, others don’t. How about you?”

The open question is broad, the closed question narrow. The open question allows the person’s full scope; the closed question limits him to a specific answer.

F. Direct versus indirect questions.

- “What do you think of the new grading system?” – interrogation type question

 “You must have many thoughts about the new grading system.” – invitation to expression
- “You have been here a week now. What do you have to say for yourself?”

 “You’ve been here a week now. There must be a lot you want to talk about.”
- “How does the new job seem to you?”

 “I’m wondering how the new job seems to you.”

As indicated by their name, direct questions are straight queries, whereas indirect questions inquire without seeming to do so. They are useful because you get away from the atmosphere of always asking questions and yet they do show interest and elicit response.

- **Double questions**

These are either/or questions that limit the respondent to one of two answers. These are most always wrong to ask.

- “Do you want to sit near Jane or Judy?”

 “Do you wish to live with your mother or father?”

G. In our relationship we need to get below surface talk and connect with the inner person with all their dreams and fears. We want the kid to be able to talk about what is really going on inside of him/her. Kids desperately need and want to do this. However, they are afraid to open up for fear of rejection. Many of them have been hurt and rejected many times.

Inside, kids are thinking this way:

“I’m afraid that if you know me as I really am, that you won’t love me. But I need you to know and love me as I really am.”

“If I feel you love me, then I will start to open up to you. I want you to show me first that you love me before I will risk myself. If I fear you are rejecting me, I will retreat again and protect myself.”

Kids will test you to see if you are safe and trustworthy.

The key to developing trust is time, lots of affirmation and dependability.

H. Responses that help draw people out

Suppose a kid makes the commonly heard statement, “I don’t get along with my parents.” Here are some examples of responses that will invite the kid to further express himself.

You don’t get along with your parents.

Your parents?

What do you mean when you say...

I don’t understand what you mean when you say...

Can you help me understand?

Can you give me an example of how you...

Tell me more about this.

Uh-hum... For instance?

Oh?... I see.

When did you first notice that...

How do you feel about this? (Perhaps the most important question one could ask.)

What are some of the things you and your parents disagree about?

What are some problems kids like you have... not just you, but all kids in general?

What are your parents like? What is your dad like? What is your mom like?
(general questions)

You seem to be very upset about this.

You look worried, or you look unhappy.

Avoid asking a question which calls for a yes or no answer.

Just be silent (A word about silence. In people, and particularly in adolescents, silence tends to provoke anxiety. Silence generally loses its effect if too prolonged.)

Do you have some ideas what has caused these problems?

Would you like to talk about this?

Maybe it would help to talk about this.

Compared to you, what type of people are your parents? (In reporting to this statement, the kid will reveal something about himself. Follow this up.)

If your parents were here, what would they say about this problem?