

Youth Work: Peer vs Authority

As I've ministered in youth work for many years, I've discovered the difficulty in maintaining the needed authority with students without losing the camaraderie and trust we enjoy. Indeed, many of us tend to gravitate towards one or the other, either too authoritative or too much like a peer. Unfortunately, both ends of the spectrum render the same results—ineffectiveness with those we wish to influence. This issue has the capacity to make or break volunteers in youth work.

Being too authoritarian tends to erode influence with students because they feel like you are always nagging—like the sin police. They feel badgered, and suffocated with correction. They don't feel like you can have fun, which is something every student craves. At this point, you lose influence because students feel like your advice is just one more way to ruin their fun. Students will also avoid being honest with you about their struggles. They won't trust you nor feel like they can be themselves around you. Since our job is to influence students for the kingdom of God, they must feel a sense of trust with us; otherwise, our efforts will be rendered ineffective.

On the other hand, being too permissive, as peers are, results in decreased influence. Groups with permissive leaders tend to lose control of the group to sin and licentiousness with little respect towards godly authority. Students won't listen to permissive leaders. Even when things get really bad and the permissive leader tries to gain control, it's often too late. The group or student is too far gone in sin and disruption to respect what the leader says.

So yes, it's important for us to strike the balance between being an authority while being a peer. How do we do this? Let's discuss a few principles that might help.

1. Adjust Our Expectations. Young teens are in the throws of puberty. Their hormones are raging. Their body is changing. Their emotions run in extremes. They crave peer acceptance so they act out, show off and go to great lengths for peer approval. They crave independence yet without responsibility. They often feel insecure, not only about their looks but also about their decisions and the kind of person they are and will become. Remember, they are at a stage in life when they are breaking away from their parents in order to gain their own identity. This often leads to insecurity. "Am I in with the right crowd?" "Am I a failure?" "Am I likeable?" "Who am I?" Teens have a shorter attention span than adults. Teens also tend to be run by their emotions more than adults. (It's a scientific fact that when compared to adults, teens use the emotional section of the brain far more than the rational section.) Teens feel strongly about issues, see things as black and white and often don't think before they speak or act. When you add it all up, everything is tailor made for disruption, silliness, drama, and bad decision making.

Yet for those who gravitate towards being authoritarian, it becomes a losing battle because we carry too high of expectations. We find ourselves expecting adult behavior, which is unrealistic and unnecessary. We need to realize the unique stage in life in which teens live. It

would be helpful for us to remember all the foolish risks we took as a teen and all the stupid decisions we made. With people, we're not looking for perfection, only progress.

On the other hand, if we gravitate towards permissiveness, like a peer, we are probably expecting too little from them. If we expect little, that's probably what we'll get. Even though teens crave independence without responsibility, they still see us as adults and expect us to be authoritative. They may challenge your authority, but in most cases, just to see how tough you are and what you're made of. Don't disappoint them. Just because they challenge your authority doesn't mean they don't expect you to exert your authority. Remember, God put us in their lives to help guide and coach them. We must stand against man pleasing and become God-pleasing. It's ok if they get mad at us. Often times they return with an apology and a godly will to change.

2. Major In The Majors and Minor In The Minors. Authoritarian volunteers often make an issue of everything. "Hey, use a coaster on that table with your can of pop!" "Your language is too negative—not God honoring--I don't think you should keep using the word 'stupid' or 'crap.'" "You should really only listen to music with healthy lyrics." Here's the point, God doesn't do this with us, so why turn around and demand this from others? If God picked at every little sin we committed or every area of irresponsibility, we'd never follow Him. We'd hate to be around Him. See Ephesians 6:4. "Fathers, don't exasperate your children..." We need to discern the main area in which God is working and come along side of that. Students who constantly feel nagged will not respond very well. We need to let the little things go and focus on the weightier issues, like their success at relationships and whether or not they are progressing in their relationship with God.

On the other hand, those gravitating towards the peer end of the spectrum, rarely make an issue of anything. Again, God is not like that with us. If He was, we would not feel he really cares about us.

3. Private Admonishment or Public Rebuke?

When students need correction, it's generally more suitable and effective to admonish them in private, not public. There is a place for public admonishment but those should be rare and always followed up with a private conversation. For instance, when a teen is overly disruptive during a meeting, it's appropriate to regain control by calling out them out in front of everyone. Perhaps making them sit in a different location—away from their friends. Then, after the meeting, in private, communicate how inappropriate they were, your expectations, and God's vision for them. But know this, over used public rebukes will become ineffective. Youth meetings will become a rabble of chaos when the adults are regularly shouting at the kids and threatening them to be quiet. It's not too long before the shouting falls on deaf ears, the youth worker becomes the bad guy, and the meeting becomes extremely ineffective. It's more effective to have a private, yet sober and calm conversation with the youth member(s). See Matthew 18:15. This can also be a time for you to make spiritual progress with them. At the same time, we should not expect the youth meeting to go perfectly smoothly, without disruptions. We need to let some things go. It's ok to have some minor disruptions.

4. Discipline or Love? The authoritarian volunteer disciplines for correction and punishment, not necessarily for love. Many of us forget that discipline is love. See Hebrews 12:7-11. Those who gravitate towards being authoritarian need to remember that love and restoration is our aim, not punishment. See Galatians 6:1. Those who are permissive need to remember that godly discipline is love and this discipline is needed from time to time. Those who fail to discipline will reap a bitter harvest.

5. Structure or Fun? Let's not forget that kids need to have fun. Fun is good! Those of us tending towards the authority side sometimes feel as though fun is juxtaposed to something good and godly. Although we wouldn't admit it, we sometimes feel that if someone is having fun, they are unspiritual or selfish because they should be doing work. Frankly, some of us could use occasional periods of fun chaos to lighten us up and cause us to laugh! On the other hand, those who forsake structure will wind up with an unruly group while scaring off many healthy students. These groups are characterized by weak leaders with students who have difficulty following instructions and trouble engaging in team work. Teens need a good amount of structure. Fortunately, we can have fun and structure with just a little bit of planning.

Many have termed youth group meetings as "organized chaos." That's a good thing. It's ok not to have perfect structure in your activities with youth. Students have difficulty enough sitting still and paying attention during a bible teaching and discussion. Let's make sure we're not expecting perfect cooperation in our post meeting fun activities. Again, this will be a losing battle. Neither should we measure our youth groups by the same standards we would with girl or boy scouts. One of our main objectives is to have fun with the students and enjoy them as unique individuals whom God created and loves. Now, volunteers inclined towards the peer end tend to forsake all structure, which is costly. When this is the case, fun activities become a night mare--either not planned at all or ill conceived so that no one can enjoy them. Mass chaos gets old and boring after a while. We must plan structured fun activities that are not too complicated to follow and enjoy.

6. Siding With Parents or Students? Students often complain to youth workers about their parents. Volunteers on the peer side soon see parents as the bad guys and develop distrust towards the parents. Many of our volunteers are not having needed conversations with parents because they are trying to work the peer end too much. This doesn't help the student and leaves parents in the dark, unable to come along side with supportive collaboration and prayer. Often, parents give the missing pieces of information. In addition, if conflict or sin has risen to such an extent that communication with parents is a must, it blindsides the parents with a back log of issues they knew nothing about. In the end, this approach alienates parents and students. On the other hand, some youth volunteers rat out students much too soon and over insignificant issues. This can make parents defensive about their kids or propel them to go after their students on these minor issues. It won't take long before the student figures out, "I can't trust my youth leader. I can't talk to my youth leader." We need balance. Being on the side of students or parents is not necessarily mutually exclusive. We are in this together and need to see the relationship as mutually beneficial.

We need to give students time to digest our loving and biblical counsel. Our hope is they make their faith their own and wrestle through difficult issues and sin. Students need time to process and decide. However, there comes a time, when the issues are so serious, we need to communicate to students, “Look, either you tell your parents what’s going on, or I will have to.” In most crises situations, youth volunteers will need to communicate with parents ourselves without waiting for students to process. There may be exceptions, but those are few and far between. Please consult your ministry coach.

Strive to have healthy dialogue with parents. If there are positive things to communicate, then communicate it. If there are troubling things going on, mention this early rather than later. Healthy communication does not necessarily imply weekly phone calls. Email is an inferior and extremely difficult form of communication for negative issues.