

What is “Youth at Risk” Ministry?

Adolescence can be a challenging stage of life not only for teenagers but also the people with whom they interact. Young people today are growing up quickly and see violence and destruction in nearly every aspect of life. Although most teens do not have severe problems, to many the transition into adulthood can be very difficult. Regardless of the ease with which one grows up, every young person is "at risk" to one degree or another. Our young people are vulnerable to a multitude of stressful social and personal situations that can harm them, reduce the quality of their lives or interfere with academic success. Everyone - schools, parents, and communities - must work together to provide an environment where there is relationships of trust, understanding, value and love for teenagers. While the symptoms of troubled teens are extensive, the most common are behavioral issues, addiction or overuse of abusive substances, an attraction to negative peer pressures, gangs, guns, depression or a general lack of interest in their everyday environment.

As youth ministers, we use Christian principles to make present an environment in which we can address the multi-dimensional problems that youth face today. While this kind of ministry can be scary, we also understand its necessity. But how do we approach this ministry? What exactly does “Youth at Risk” Ministry actually mean?

“Youth at Risk” Ministry has varied definitions and encompasses many programs and projects. There isn’t any one program or project that will satisfy the needs of all your teens. However, any program should include an approach to the spiritual needs of youth in trouble and those who find difficulty seeking answers to life’s hard questions. There are five characteristics that should be incorporated into any program if one hopes to minister with Youth at Risk.

1. **Trust** - a sense of acceptance and belonging which generates openness in relationships and hopefulness about the future. When trust doesn’t develop, people can become despondent, dishearten, discouraged, and dejected. Trust can not be taught in a classroom, however. It is a lived experience built within a long term relationships. Youth ministers must foster relationships where trust is a two way street. God is the one who ultimately promises to be trustworthy, to love unconditionally, to be the Father to the fatherless (Psalm 68:5), a friend who sticks closer than a brother (Proverbs 18:24). God is the one who meets our deepest need for love and trust. But before one can get his ultimate need for love and trust met, he must first see it displayed in a real people - in us. We are the role models for those we serve. We must practice what we preach. But we also must remember boundaries and our own limits. Trying to build trust by encouraging young people to ‘spill their guts’ outside of a professional counseling experience can be detrimental to both youth and adults.
2. **Power** - the ability to both decide on and shape the course of events in which one’s life and happiness depend. Personal power is often referred to as independence. Properly understood, it emerges directly out of binding relationships. Sometimes, however, it appears as a form of rebellion in children who are attempting to take on the decision making processes for themselves. This struggle of independence is what adolescence is all about. Our definition of success in ministry is often getting youth to do the right

thing as we define it. Their definition of what's right may be different and we must respect their right to decide for themselves without enabling them to destroy their lives. Our task is to keep enough structure and yet empower our young people to make decisions. Allowing young people to fail helps them gain confidence and learn lessons, so long as failures are evaluated. It is also crucial to provide the recognition of the good that is young people accomplish. Youth are their own worst critics; they need adults who can help them unpack life's experience without saying 'I told you so.' For every bad thing that happens, emphasize 3 good things. In this way you are re-enforcing the love that is shared for one another: God's love.

3. **Purpose** – a motivation to act derived from a conviction of truth. We are called to give our young people meaning and value. This often includes a reason for living, being and moving in an important direction. Many troubled teens begin with a lack of purpose in their lives. They become depressed, lack values, goals, or truths. Loneliness and having nothing important to do is a big problem for teens. When a young person gets a grasp of God's purpose for their life, it can do more good than anything else. A young person who develops their faith simultaneously develops a purpose in their life. One exceptional aid to developing purpose is involvement in service projects. Acting out our love for others and God's love for us often allows participants to discover their own power to transcend themselves and get into the lives of others. Encourage questions, but gently remind young people that the best place to question is around and among those wiser than ourselves who most likely have the answers.
4. **Mastery/Confidence** - one's ability to complete tasks successfully. We are called to help young people build a strong sense of self-esteem, self-value, and self-confidence. Typically teens that experience so much failure begin to believe they can not succeed at anything. If they don't finish a project, then it is not open to criticism and the possibility of failure. As a young person gains a sense of purpose from their Creator, they also discover the peace that comes from depending on God and his agents (parents, teachers, and friends) for direction. Teach youth to rely upon the power of God and to identify this power as illustrated around them. Give them the opportunities to know that they can do all things through the Christ who gives strength (Philippians 4:13).
5. **Self-Sacrifice** – true giving of oneself to a larger cause. Jesus best describe it this way: "For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it" (Luke 9:24). A young person without a developed sense of self-sacrifice will seem selfish or disloyal. S/He may not care about anyone or anything other than themselves. Youth Ministry must give him/her a sense of fellowship, of belonging. Provide opportunities where youth are able to express themselves without judgment and foster environments where youth can share their lives and their faith without them wondering "What's in it for ME?"

Most importantly, begin by moving in a positive direction. If our teens are going to grow and make a difference in their world, they will need to know someone cares and is listening now. Most of all they need to experience a relationship with a loving and forgiving God. You are called to be a witness of that God.