



Help! I'm in Charge of a Youth Group

by Dan & Melissa Woltmann

Youth leaders - a church gets them because of the need for youth activities. If a church has young people in it (and most do!), definite attention must be paid to reaching, teaching, and fellowshiping with them. Whether you are Bible-school trained or a lay person that has been asked to help a youth pastor or to direct youth activities on your own, the following information should help you establish a youth activity schedule that will be God-honoring.

Planning an activity

The first step is to **get ideas** for activities. You can use your own personal experiences, the WILDS S.O.A.P. books, other game and activity books, your local chamber of commerce, and brainstorming with other youth leaders (both in your church and in sister churches). We have asked our teens for ideas; however, be advised that unless you have a great deal of experience this is not the most successful idea. You can always say no, but do try to have an open door to their thoughts and ideas.

Depending on your activity you will need to secure a **location** -- *ahead of time*. If the location is to be the church be certain to check with the Pastor's schedule. You do not want to have a rowdy activity if there is to be a counseling session, wedding, etc. One of the most difficult areas is to avoid worldly influences. Regardless where you go outside of the church setting, worldly ideas will be audible and visible. When at all possible try to set aside a location (skating rink, bowling alley, etc.) for your group only. With smaller groups this is more difficult so you should then think of timing. Pay attention to when it is more "family friendly". Ask the manager to place your group away from the main crowd if possible. Be certain to have plenty of adults with you to help monitor what is going on not only with your group but the atmosphere of the location. We have left locations very early because the atmosphere was getting out of hand around us. Use situations that may arise from these activities as discussion starters on what to do when placed in a bad situation.

We would also suggest getting with **small groups** of your young people and doing something with them. This would allow you an informal way to learn more about particular needs, fears and desires of that particular age group. It could be as simple as having the Senior High over to your home for a game night and snacks or taking the Junior High to a favorite fast food place for ice cream after church. It is also important for you to have one on one time with your teens. Youth leaders do need to counsel with their teens on a one on one basis. **WARNING:** At NO TIME should a youth leader be alone with a child/teen of the opposite sex. Anytime you do have one on one time be certain that parents and pastor are in full knowledge and that you are in an open place, never behind closed doors. Your church may have guidelines for handling such situations; ask if you are not sure. If so, be sure to follow them to the letter. This is for the protection of the teen, the youth leader and the church.

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A smart youth leader will not try to handle an activity alone. **Get workers** -- you can never have too many. As the youth leader, you need to train and make sure that all your youth workers are on the same page as you and the desires of the pastor; everyone needs to support the guidelines of the church as a cohesive unit. Always make sure there is at least one leader of the opposite sex at an activity. If situations arise such as dress code problems or health issues, a female leader is better able to handle the young ladies and a male leader the young men. Numerous workers also are valuable for crowd control, they can handle jobs such as setting up food, videos, etc. freeing you up to administrate and deal with the youth. Also, having many adults at a youth activity allows teens to see that adults care about them. At the activity, you must be sure the adults are interacting with the youth and not sitting around talking amongst themselves.

General Reminders

- In choosing the day of the event, try to **plan for optimum attendance**. Keep in mind your teens' school, music, sports and work schedules. Ask your teens for school and sports calendars so that you can plan for optimum attendance; you may not be able to work around everyone but if you put forth an effort to consider them, they will be more likely to attend. Be aware that you do not plan activities that consistently leave the same teens unable to attend. Also consider the family situations of your teens; teens of divorced parents may have visitation schedules to consider.
- **Plan, but be very flexible**. If a game is not working, move on. There is no sense sticking to something just because it is "on the schedule". Over plan an activity in the event a game runs shorter than you thought or a game simply is not working. Do not feel pressured to complete everything on your list; only you know what is planned. At the same time, if the group really seems to be enjoying a game let it go a little longer than planned, but move on to the next event before the excitement wears off. "Leave them wanting more."
- **Always stay excited**. If you are not excited about the activity, your teens will not be excited.
- **Always have a purpose**. Regardless of whether you are going out for ice cream, to a ball game, playing a silly game, or having a youth revival you must know what it is that you would like to see accomplished in the lives of the young people because of it. Is it just simply to relax? Is it to evangelize their friends? Is it to show that you don't have to be a star athlete to participate in sports? Is it to show them that Christians can have fun without the world's consequences to "fun"? No matter the reason, everything must have purpose.



Suggestions for activities. Listed here are simple suggestions to help you get started.

- Teens need to have **fun things** to do. All that energy needs to be directed and directed positively. Organize activities that include competitions that are either team driven or for individuals. Some young people thrive at one over the other. You can adapt many sporting games into something that will level the playing field simply by changing the rules. For example, in kick ball have the players run the bases backward, either literally, or by going to 3rd, 1st, 2nd, and then home. In soft ball, make the boys bat opposite hand or with only one hand. Have the team skip to bases. Ground balls doubles. There are many ways to do it; you are only limited by your imagination.
- Teens also need **service activities**. The youth program is the training ground for the next generation. They must learn not only by example but by doing. Suggestions for service activities include: rest home visits, yard work for shut-ins, taking meals to the needy, singing in the choir or playing an instrument, assisting in a Sunday school class with attendance, or in helping out with one of the children's programs (pre-school, Junior Church, VBS, etc.). Don't forget about planning mission trips. We do suggest that you establish limits for certain service activities. For example, many times 7th graders want to help in the Junior Church not so much as a service but because they are not ready to grow up. Our personal policy is that they must have completed their 7th grade school year before they can be a Junior Church helper; some churches have an older policy for teen service workers for legal reasons. Know your young people and what they are able to do. Regardless of the age limitations, do not allow your young people to be missing many preaching services under the guise of "service". Even adults need to be careful they are not out of preaching services more than once a week.
- A **banquet** is also another activity you can involve your young people. The banquet can either be for them or they can put on the banquet for others in the church. Banquets help teach practical and proper etiquette, honor achievements of the teens or others in the church, and offer alternatives to worldly activities. The detail put into the banquet can vary. If you have only a few senior high teens, you could just take them out to a fancy restaurant for a Graduation Banquet. Here are a few banquet ideas to get you thinking: Parent/Teen Banquet, Mother/Daughter, Valentine's, Graduation, Senior Citizen, Pastor Appreciation, Worker Appreciation, etc.
- We have noticed that depending on the size of the church, **summer** either makes or breaks the youth group. Smaller churches tend to let the summer go and do not plan for the teens. Larger churches tend to lean toward more activities. You must remember that summer is the most important part of youth group. There are no distractions from school. You do not have to plan around academic and sports schedules. Your young people are out from under the worldly influences of many of their school mates.



Summer activity suggestions

- **Camp** is a must. Camp is very important for a young person's spiritual growth. It is a time to take a week away from the world and focus on God and His plan for their lives. Plan well in advance; many of the best camps fill up in January or February.
- **Vacation Bible School** is a great service activity for your young people. They can help with visiting neighborhoods, snacks, game time, and program skits.
- Plan on **weekday activities** since there is no school. These can be as elaborate as amusement parks and tubing or rafting trips or as simple as an ice cream social and baseball game at the church.
- If at all possible try to include a **mission trip**. Many churches are opting to choose either camp or a mission trip during the summer simply because of economics and that is fine. You might want to rotate between camp and a mission trip every other year or two so that all your teens have an opportunity to go on a mission trip at least a few times while they are in the youth group.
- One of our favorite activities has always been **S.N.A.C.- Sunday Night After Church**. These are simple activities that include food and games. Many times we would theme the night. On one such occasion we called it a Mini SNAC – all snacks brought had to be bite sized. This is also a great way to train your elementary aged kids for activities, especially in the summer, since bed times are more relaxed. Begin when evening church is dismissed and end at 9 pm for both age groups during the summer (8:30 pm for Juniors during the school year). Include a trip to a fast food place or someone's home, but generally hold the S.N.A.C. at the church.

No one likes to hear a list of do's and don'ts, so just think of these as more tips.

Do's for the summer

- **Do include upcoming 6th graders** (as a privilege) and outgoing seniors (as a service). Leave the 6th graders participation at the discretion of their parents. Some high school seniors are not quite ready to leave the nest, so help them by including them as "assistants". (NOTE: Because areas are different, defer to the school system as to when to move your students into the youth group. Some school systems include 6th graders in middle school; others leave 6th graders in elementary. If your 6th graders are considered middle schoolers, MOVE THEM UP!)
- **Do plan weekly activities**. Your teens will go where the action is. If your church does not have something for them to do, they will go to one that does, regardless of the other church's doctrine, philosophy or standards.



- **Do have an all day activity** - light schedule, allows the teens to “hang out” in a wholesome atmosphere. It is easier if you have a large facility to be able to do this. If you are a full time youth pastor you can still be “in the office”. It sounds like being lazy, but you will learn a great deal about your teenagers from a day like this. Have games available, appropriate videos, and snacks (have them bring a bag lunch or \$\$ for pizza). Keep the schedule unstructured. We only required one “mandatory fun time” (a volleyball game, or something such as that). We also allowed the teens to bring skateboards, skates, bikes, etc. as long as they had the appropriate protective gear and let them use the parking lot, supervised of course.
- **Do remember to plan activities with \$\$ in mind.** In economically hard times many families may not be able to afford many activities of even \$10, especially if they have more than one teen. You need to think about the pocketbooks of the parents, too. If you have a costly activity such as an amusement park, plan on the next one or two to be either no cost or very low cost.

Don'ts for the summer

- **Don't emphasize perfect attendance.** Between family time, work obligations, and possibly sports practices it may not be possible for your teens to attend every activity. Don't take it personally. Find out if there are transportation issues that could be resolved to help in attendance. Let your teens know when you missed them at an activity.
- **Don't let down dress standards.** We learned years ago that for every church there is a differing policy on dress. Regardless of the policy preference by your church, ALL leaders and teens need to be modest and distinct in their clothing and behavior. In the spring, as temperatures warm up, be sure to have a parent/teen meeting to remind everyone of the policies of the church and youth group regarding conduct and dress standards.
- **Don't neglect time for YOUR family.** In all the planning for the youth group, do not forget the ones closest to you ... your spouse and your children. If you lose them, you've lost your ministry.

Youth ministry is exciting. Most young people just want to know that they are cared for by someone. Family is supposed to love them, but we all know that even in the best of homes, sometimes young people perceive differently. A youth leader with a heart for the spiritual growth of the young person can be a positive influence in the life of any teen. Including an activity schedule will help you “get” them in the door so that you may have an opportunity to reach them for Christ.

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