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Helping Teens Develop Authentic Relationships

JAMES WHITE

Upon reflection of my years of work with teenagers, I realize that *relational* is the word that best describes my philosophy of youth ministry. I have seen the positive impact that real, authentic relationships can have in the lives of middle and high school students. I have also seen the effects that negative, counterfeit relationships produce. I strongly believe that now more than ever we must help our kids develop the right kind of relationships, beginning with their relationship with our Lord Jesus Christ.

When I listen to someone talk about issues related to teenagers or pre-teens, I try to find out when and where they worked with them. It helps me understand their frame of reference. So, let me familiarize you with my background. For the past 19 years I have been privileged to serve as Youth Minister at Southwest Christian Church in East Point, Georgia. Southwest is a regional church, with people driving in from many parts of the metro Atlanta area. Our teens come from various family, ethnic, and economic backgrounds. Having been a youth minister for so long in one place has afforded me the unique opportunity to watch our kids from birth to high school graduation. I have also been able to observe several different “youth groups” in the cultures of the 80s, 90s, and new millennium. Over the years, I’ve worked with hundreds of middle and high school kids and have observed their relationships with family, friends, and God. I am very thankful that God called me into youth ministry. It has been a wonderful experience that I have deeply loved.

TEENAGERS WANT AND NEED RELATIONSHIPS

Deep down, all teenagers want and need relationships. For example, if you were to visit some of the schools my students attend, you would notice that very few students just go to class and come home immediately after school. Teens today are involved in all kinds of extracurricular activities. The ones who are involved in sports are involved in several different sports on a year around basis. Others participate in the marching band, orchestra, majorettes, drill team, flag team, sports training, theater and drama clubs, language clubs, school newspapers, Fellowship of Christian Athletes and Youth Life Clubs, etc. Today there are a multitude of opportunities for teens to belong to a group. Most teens and pre-teens really want to

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be accepted in a group, and they will go to great lengths to do so. If they are unable to develop real, authentic relationships, they will turn to the plethora of counterfeit relationships available. The consequences of these fake relationships are often destructive.

Consider the kinds of things that have been in the news in the past few years about teens: the shootings at Columbine and Heritage high schools; a television documentary about rampant teen sexual activity in Rockdale County, Georgia; the ever

steady abuse of alcohol by teens and even pre-teens; the rise in popularity of the “ecstasy” drug at parties; and the obvious materialism of teen culture, to name a few. Many are asking why all of this is happening. On the front page of a magazine that was printed right after the school shootings is a picture of a group of teenagers. Plastered across their picture is the big word “Why?”

I certainly do not think I have all the answers about the problems of youth culture, but I do believe that many of the problems teenagers have today arise from their hunger and need for relationships. Take the Columbine situation for example. Reportedly, one of the major factors motivating the boys to shoot at and even kill their classmates was their perception that they had been rejected. Did this perceived rejection cause these young men to give up their search for relationships? Did they give up and go live as loners? No. Instead they found each other and bonded together in a counterfeit relationship that ultimately caused horrific harm to innocent people.

Consider the subject of teen sex. Does sexual activity generally begin because the teen is simply seeking physiological pleasure? I don’t think so. From what I’ve seen, it usually starts because teens want to be “cool,” and they have the impression that “everyone is doing it.” Or they fear that if they don’t have sex, they will lose their boyfriend or girlfriend.

How about substance abuse or materialism? Much of it is attributable to peer pressure that says you have to go to this party, drink this, dress a certain way, drive a certain car, etc., in order to fit in. It isn’t always verbalized. Kids aren’t really as fearful anymore of being “put down” in front of their friends. They do, however, greatly fear being *left out*. They know that look that says “you’re not welcome”—and this is just about the worst thing teens and particularly pre-teens can experience.

The point is that the underlying motivation for teenagers being involved in all these activities, good and bad, is the search for authentic relationship. God has made us as social beings. We need each other, and teens are no different. A tremendous number of young people suffer the consequences of divorce and illegitimacy. There are so many more single parent and step family homes today. The psychological impact cannot be overstated. Even in homes where both parents are present, both are most likely working fulltime. All of these factors accentuate the desire for relationships and a sense of belonging. Teens look for someone to pay attention to them and accept them. The trouble is that they are often too immature to realize they are looking for a relationship in the wrong place. That is why it is vitally important that parents and adult mentors not only show our teens what a real relationship looks like and how to develop it but also that we provide opportunities that will be conducive to the growth of authentic relationships.

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CHARACTERISTICS OF AUTHENTIC RELATIONSHIPS

During the years that I have worked with teenagers, I have found that authentic relationships exhibit some common characteristics. The first and most important trait I see in teens who have good interpersonal relationships is a *genuine relationship with God*. In other words, the teens who are the most spiritually mature are the ones who also have the most authentic interpersonal relationships. Invariably, the teens who get along best with parents, siblings, friends, teachers, coaches, and employers are the teens who have really surrendered their lives to Jesus Christ.

This seems to make perfect sense. In order to experience Jesus Christ authentically, I must humbly admit my need for him and my hopelessness without him. That goes against my nature and pride. However, when I truly submit to Christ and he begins to change me, my relationships with others will be affected. It will be easier for me to submit to authority, be patient with people, and to think of others before myself when Christ is at work in my heart. The Bible teaches that if we let our natural inclinations rule us, we will be misguided,

jealous, self-centered, and unloving. But because of God's love, everything about us—including our attitudes and relationships—will begin to change for the better. The Apostle Paul said it this way:

For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, despicable, hating one another. But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. (Titus 3:3–5)

Our grateful response to God's mercy will be seen in the way we live and in the way we treat others. Accordingly, several characteristics of good relationships will emerge.

Mutual love and respect for each other are evident when we are rooted and grounded in a genuine faith in God and invite God to change us. For example, parents and teens are going to have conflicts, but those in a good relationship deal with them differently. I have witnessed family shouting matches in the church parking lot; but I have also seen parents and teens disagree without being rude or disrespectful. When the relationship is right, we don't want to hurt or embarrass the other person, regardless of what the conflict may be. Romans 12:10 says, "Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves." (See also 1 Tim 5:1–2.) The bottom line is that a good, authentic relationship will exude love and respect.

Trust is also important in authentic relationships. Teens particularly need to talk to someone about their innermost feelings. Most of the time that someone is a friend of similar age. I have mediated innumerable disputes between teenagers because of a broken trust. Something was said in confidence, and then it got repeated, and then it became World War Three! All of us—young and old—can be deeply hurt by those who betray us or let us down. The good news is that I've seen some beautiful relationships between teens that started at an early age and survived into adulthood. One reason they survived was because of trust. It wasn't a pact of secrecy that refused to reveal dangerous or destructive behavior. Rather, it was a trust that said, "You can count on me," and, "I really do care," and, "Let's help each other."

Communication is an important part of any authentic relationship. There is no way really to know a person without it. The problem is that it is difficult and requires commitment. Many times teens and adults seem to live in two different worlds with distinctly different views and languages. Often, we are so busy

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that no real talking or listening goes on between parents and teenagers. When that happens, trouble will result. On the other hand, when there is a commitment to spend time together and listen to each other, the relationship will be strengthened. For example, I know of a mom who made sure she always waited up for her daughters when they were out on dates. When they came home, there was

a time of snacks, listening, and conversation about the date. The interest this mom showed on a consistent basis, which cost her some sleep, ultimately contributed to the closeness they now share as adults.

Finally, *encouragement and accountability* are part of any authentic relationship. Teens in particular need both of these elements in their lives. If they are fortunate enough to have several good relationships, they are more likely to have someone to turn to when life gets hard. Think about the culture in which our teenagers are growing up. Aside from the usual pressure to be popular and to fit in, there is the pressure to perform academically, to balance all the activities in which they are involved, and for many the pressure to play roles at home that were never intended for them. For example, I have known teenagers who have had to be surrogate mothers or fathers to their younger siblings because of divorce or other circumstances. Add to this the effort it takes to resist the temptations of this world, and teenagers really need encouragement. A

good relationship is going to be an oasis of encouragement. Consider Galatians 6:2: “Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.” And also Hebrews 10:24–25: “And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds . . . encouraging one another.” Encouragement is vital to any good relationship, but teens also need accountability.

It is fairly popular to be an encourager, but most people shy away from confronting and holding people accountable. This is understandable, because it is often unpleasant. Some of the toughest times I have had in youth ministry have been related to holding

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teens accountable. At times, I have had to confront

students about behaviors that were dangerous and against God’s will. I’ve had to reveal unpleasant things to parents about their kids. It was never easy, but I did it because I loved them and wanted to help them. I am reminded of Proverbs 27:6, “Well meant are the wounds a friend inflicts, but profuse are the kisses of an enemy.” Authentic relationships are characterized by a willingness of two people to be accountable to each other before God. Teenagers who are in this kind of relationship are better able to withstand the pressures and temptations of the teenage years. They encourage each other and hold each other accountable in a way that makes them both stronger.

We often make mistakes as churches, mentors, and parents, in relation to our teens. However, there are some practical ways we can help our kids develop good, healthy, authentic relationships.

MISTAKES WE MAKE

Misguided goals that church leaders and parents sometimes have for our teenagers impede the development of authentic relationships. Don’t take this wrong. I love and appreciate church leaders, volunteers, and parents! Teens cannot be brought into healthy relationships without them. But over the years I have observed some things that trouble me.

One mistake churches often make regarding youth ministry is falling victim to the “bigger is better” syndrome. There is too much focus on big events like concerts, conventions, lock-ins, and “hip” youth meetings that might attract large numbers of teenagers. It’s certainly not wrong to want a big youth group, but we miss the boat if we think big events alone are going to produce real spiritual growth and authentic relationships. Of course, I do “big events” just like everyone else. But they must be built on the consistent weekly exercise of the spiritual disciplines in your group. Bible study, prayer, fellowship, and service are vital to spiritual growth and the development of authentic relationships. These disciplines are a solid foundation upon which you can build a youth program.

It is time for those of us in church leadership positions to decide that our goal is to help our teens become *disciples*. This takes time and usually happens better in small groups, where there can be mutual encouragement and accountability. Jesus spent most of his time with a small group of disciples. I’d much rather help produce smaller numbers of real disciples than large numbers of nominal Christians.

Parents sometimes lose sight of what should be their real goal for their child. There is nothing wrong with wanting your child to get good grades, excel at sports, get a job, etc. The problem is when these things become priorities over and above the child’s spiritual development, which, as we have said before, directly impacts his or her development of authentic relationships. I have been blessed to know a lot of great parents over the years. Most of them have really tried to keep their kids active in the life of our church. Too many times, however, I have seen parents who make the mistake of focusing their child on temporal rather than eternal goals. For example, I have known teens who really wanted to come to youth group or Bible study but usually did not because they “had to study” or “had to work” or “had a game.” Many times their parents were making them do these things and not encouraging church involvement. Ironically, these same parents would be in my office a few years later wondering why their child was in trouble, why their son wouldn’t

talk to them anymore, or why their daughter didn't want to come to church anymore. Parents need to be very careful that goals related to this temporal world don't interfere with their child's spiritual growth. In my view, the primary goal of parents should be to rear their children to be mature Christian adults.

PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS

From a practical standpoint, there are three ways best to help teens develop authentic relationships.

Teach them. We must continually and consistently teach teens what God's word says about our relationship with him and with others. We cannot assume they know this information. In fact, we should always assume that they need to be reminded of it. In my years of youth ministry, I have learned that the busy nature of our teenagers' lives, together with their short attention spans, necessitates that we repeat the truth over and over again. For example, I am always asking my teens this question: "If Jesus were physically in this room with us today, what would he be doing?" We talk about where he would be sitting, who he would hang out with, what he might say, what kind of car he would drive, etc. Then we go to passages of scripture like Matthew 7:28–9:38, where Jesus had just finished the Sermon on the Mount. He could have called it a day with the knowledge that he had just delivered the greatest sermon ever. But he didn't do that. Rather, Jesus came down from the mountain and put into practice the lofty precepts he had just talked about. He helped people who might be overlooked or ostracized by the culture of the day—a leper, a centurion, Peter's mother-in-law, two men possessed by demons, a paralytic, Matthew the tax collector, a ruler's daughter, two blind men, and a man who could not speak. I use this passage to challenge my teens to look at people through the eyes of Christ and open their hearts to those outside of their comfort zone. We look at other passages to examine how God wants us to treat each other and how we should expect to be treated.

God's word can have a great effect on our youth. The key is getting them into the word on a consistent basis. One of the best ways to do that is to get them a one-year youth devotional book. There are several good books available, but I prefer *Josh McDowell's One Year Book of Youth Devotions*.¹ Because everyone is doing the same thing every day of the year, having the teens go through this book together has been one of the best things I've ever done. When your group meets each week, it is easy to say, "Okay, who can tell me about our devotions for this week?" This keeps them accountable and encourages all to keep reading.

Model it. All your teaching is not going to matter if you don't model what you are saying. This is probably the most important thing you can do to help teens develop healthy relationships. They have to see it lived out. Someone once said, "I'd rather see a sermon than hear one," and with teens I couldn't agree more. Sunday school teachers who show attention to their students outside of class are far more effective than those who don't. What do you remember from your childhood and teen years at church? Do you remember the specifics of the lessons that were taught, or do you remember the people who taught them? The truth has to be taught and then modeled for our kids. Pre-teens are impressionable and teens are perceptive. When they see someone say one thing and then do another, they get confused or cynical. Teenagers don't expect perfection in people, but they know what a hypocrite looks like. When they hear the truth from you and see it lived out in your life, they will respect you and be more willing to open their heart to the gospel you are trying to teach them.

We need to purposely expose our teenagers to good role models and people who are in authentic relationships. Teens need to see young couples working together in the church. Teens need to be around older couples or individuals who can show them Christ-like character and wisdom. Teens need to see college students who are enthusiastic about their walk with the Lord. It is also important for teens and pre-teens to be exposed to other kids who are in good relationships. That is why I purposely ask some of my older, more mature teenagers to reach out to new kids, younger kids, or kids who are having problems.

One way youth leaders and parents can demonstrate the qualities of a good relationship is by being genuinely interested in teenagers and what goes on in their lives. This involves listening, encouraging, and correcting. Teens love to get notes and email. Keeping in touch on a regular basis, showing up to watch their

ballgames, and listening when they're hurting shows them you care. Doing these things also helps when you have to discipline them. They will be much more accepting of it and respectful if they know you care about them. The bottom line is that our teenagers must see that we have a genuine relationship with God that has permeated every aspect of our life. When they hear the truth taught with conviction, see it lived out consistently, and know that they are loved, then there is a good chance that they too will be transformed into Christ's likeness.

Provide growth opportunities. It isn't enough for teens to learn about relationships and see them lived out. They must also have the chance to practice what they have learned and to emulate what they have seen. This can certainly happen at home, but one of the best places for practice is the church. At the congregation I serve, we have always had very active youth groups. Our group's yearly calendar includes church camps, a mission trip, Christ in Youth conference, statewide conventions, a ski trip, all kinds of youth outings, and a short overnight retreat almost every month. In addition, there are choir and drama groups for middle and high school students and small groups that meet part of the year. We try to provide something that appeals to the interests and talents of all kinds of kids. The key is that we want them involved in some kind of group where they can get to know people. Since I recognize that teens have busy lives, I try to incorporate them into the planning of the schedule, but I don't expect them to come to every event.

People sometimes ask me why we do all these things. Is it all about being a social club or having fun? Sure, we have fun, but the reason we have all of these activities is because we know kids grow spiritually and relationally from participating in them. When teenagers get together with other Christian teens and adult leaders, there's a great opportunity for them to cultivate healthy relationships. I have seen some amazing things happen to teenagers when they get away for a weekend with a group of Christians. I have also seen some pretty substantial spiritual growth occur during a week of church camp because the environment there is so conducive to mentoring and group building. Teens can change for the better and cold hearts can be softened when they are in the presence of the body of Christ.

Some of the greatest memories I have are from the mission trips we have taken. Our teens love them more than anything we do, even though it is a week of dirty, hard work. We have slept on church floors and in tents, bathed at high schools and in creeks, hammered roofing shingles in the heat of the summer, painted from dawn till dusk, prepared meals together, etc. But in the midst of all this, we grew together and learned a lot about others and ourselves.

CONCLUSION

Our children are growing up in a hostile culture that is full of pressures and mixed messages. Satan is definitely at work against them. Our job is to help them experience the grace and love of our Lord Jesus Christ. We *absolutely must* help our kids develop authentic relationships, beginning with their relationship with God. It will take time and commitment and it won't always be easy, but the rewards are immeasurable.

I'm so thankful for the *great* kids God has allowed me to know and minister to! If you're already working with kids, hang in there and stay with it for the long haul. If you're not, I invite you to join me in the wonderful world of youth ministry!

JAMES WHITE

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Josh McDowell and Bob Hostetler, *Josh McDowell's One Year Book of Youth Devotions* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers, 1999).