Straight Talk about Working with Kids, Teens & In-Betweens

CASSIE MOORE
# Table of Contents

**Introduction**

**Section 1: You, the leader**
- Why are you doing this, anyway? 8
- What kids want from their leaders 10
- Signs that you’re a leader 14
- Figure out who you are as a leader
  - Know your personality 18
  - Find your passions 19
  - Recognize your talents 20
  - Focus your mind-set 21
  - Curb your attitudes 22
- Take care of yourself
  - Mental wellness 26
  - Healthy relationships 27
  - Physical wellness 28
  - Spiritual health 29
  - Surviving mistakes and overload 29

**Section 2: Learning the basics**
- Dive in! 34
- Set goals and get started 35
- What do you do first? 38
- Support and serve with others 40
- Nurture and support families 44
- Set up safe practices 49
- Make emergency plans 53
- Avoid self-sabotage (single-handed destruction of your own efforts) 57
- Manage conflict and communicate with others 62
- Recruit, support, and serve with other leaders 68

**Section 3: Working with kids & youth**
- Untrue stereotypes of today’s youth 78
- Crafting relevant learning experiences 84
- Learning styles and how they impact those you lead 87
- Practical tips for teaching kids and youth 91
- Handling discipline 94
- Working with your biggest goofballs 100
- Girls vs. guys: what you really need to know 105
- Helpful tips for teaching in the real world 111
  - Working with small children 111
  - Working with elementary children 114
  - Working with preadolescents 116
  - Working with teenagers 119
- Tricks that work for all ages 123
- Relating to your students 127
- Get their attention, break the ice, and keep them talking 130
- The “aha moment” 134
- My biggest oopsies 136

**Conclusion**
- Final words 140
Twenty faces swiveled toward me, eagerly anticipating my lesson. I stood confidently, ready to inspire the entire classroom of inquisitive teenagers.

Yeah, right.

Let me tell you what really happened when I faced a classroom of students for the very first time.

I stood uncertainly in the front of the classroom, watching twenty middle schoolers clamber over desks and chuck books and erasers at one another.

When I attempted to get their attention, one student actually sat down.

I mentally congratulated myself for capturing her attention. Then I realized she merely paused to tie her shoe before launching herself back into the mayhem.

Contrary to what I would have called it under my breath, this was Sunday School. It felt more like a swarming school of piranhas, hungry to devour every last shred of my resolve.

My first attempt at leading students was a dismal failure. I walked out of the room with no clue about what to do. And believe me, the last thing I needed was some expert in a book or video lecturing me about all the ways I was inadequate as a volunteer.

That’s precisely why you won’t find that in this book.

Here’s the truth: I get it. I walked in your shoes. I volunteered to lead children and youth, and I still do.

Currently, I serve as a middle school religion teacher and youth worker. Before that, I led youth programs, taught school, and did everything in between. I worked in classrooms of five students and auditoriums of hundreds in summer camps, Sunday School, youth gatherings, mission trips, and service projects.

I understand the stress, apprehension, confusion, and frustration of leading young people. I dealt with drama, tears, discipline issues, awkwardness, headaches, and tension.

But these challenges often led to great surprises, hearty laughter, and deeper relationships. God gave me the privilege of seeing kids, parents, and whole families grow in grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ.

I witness attitudes, mind-sets, and behaviors change as people of all ages explore God’s Word. Seeing people work together passionately to serve others
and make a difference for someone else brings many joys. And experiencing the moment a young person grasps God’s grace is, well, priceless.

In years of researching and learning, the most valuable lessons I learned resulted from a lot of trial and error. I’d love to help you avoid some of my mistakes and start with more tools than I did.

The goal of this book is to offer you an all-encompassing how-to guide for working with children and youth, whether you work as a volunteer or as a professional youth worker.

I hope you understand yourself better as a leader, work more confidently with students, and enhance your service in practical ways.

I hope you laugh and learn alongside me. Because trust me, once you’ve had a kid puke in the back of a rental van stuck in rush-hour traffic, all you can do is chuckle.
Section 1: You, the leader
Why are you doing this, anyway?

Several thirteen-year-old girls screamed shrilly as I yanked my car to the side of the road. The thump-thump-thump sound was unmistakable. I blew a tire.

Surrounded by cornfields.

On the way to a massive weekend retreat for several hundred participants. That I would lead.

Panicked girls dragged their suitcases out of my trunk and sat on the curb. One accidentally hit the siren button on my emergency bullhorn and shattered my eardrums with a maximum-volume blast. I faced a haunting question. Why am I doing this, anyway?

As a volunteer, you probably asked yourself this very question. Often, we ask this question when everything seems to go wrong, when we’re stuck in the doldrums, or when we face a challenging situation.

I never told anyone this, but for a time, I hated my work with kids.

I had plenty of reasons. I was drowning, working too many hours for too little pay. I felt completely burnt out as I juggled endless tasks. I questioned whether my efforts were wasted on a bunch of teenagers who didn’t really care. No matter how hard I prepared or how heartfelt my intentions, I didn’t see kids impacted the way I expected.

I almost walked away from working with students for good. I started applying for corporate jobs and prepared how to break the news to my youth. I thought, “At least I’m getting paid for this. My poor volunteers actually have it worse than I do.”

In the midst of the darkness of self-doubt and frustration, God worked a big change in my heart.

Just a week before I planned to announce my decision, I experienced my first-ever mission trip. I led a group of rambunctious, troublemaking middle schoolers on one of the muddiest and coldest trips ever.

On that trip, exhausted and muddy, I saw the real heart of my students and fellow leaders. In no uncertain terms, God showed me that the vocation of working with children and teens may not be glamorous or logical, but it’s truly the most important job we can do.

Let’s be honest. Yes, it’s hard.

Youth simultaneously break your heart and renew your joy over and over again. You may travel through periods of doubt, anger, and questioning. You may find it difficult to see the fruit of your efforts. You may feel like you never have enough time to get everything done.
People question why you waste your time. “Why do you bother? And when are you going to get a real job?”

And you may struggle financially. I once broke out in tears in the cereal aisle of my grocery store because I realized my low-paying youth ministry job meant I needed a big coupon to buy a box of my favorite cereal.

But, friends, it’s the most rewarding work a person can do.

As God’s children, what we offer our students is vastly important. More critical than fame, success, or achievement, we communicate God’s love, acceptance, forgiveness, and future. Christ’s death and resurrection frees us from our bondage of sin and invites us into an eternity in heaven. Nothing in the universe comes close to the importance of this truth. And God empowers us to share it with the people surrounding us. What a privilege!

My students admit that they deeply admire volunteers and leaders who dedicate their time to work with them. They value you more than you could ever guess.

A student once wrote to me, “My leaders have been like parents to me, teaching me things I don’t know. They’ve also been like my brothers and sisters, being there for me in the hard times. They’re also my friends, because I can tell them jokes and still have fun with them.”

“I think my leaders are amazing for all they do,” says high school student Grace. “I’m so happy to talk to you and be open. I know you can’t fix my problems, but it’s just nice knowing that someone cares and has had the same experiences. You give me the feeling that everything will be okay and that God is really there.”

Countless others echo the same appreciation for adults who understand, care, and share their wisdom and concern. They silently love that they can trust and confide in you. They quietly respect our desire for them to learn and grow, even though it sometimes doesn’t seem like it.

As a middle schooler once told me, “My leaders really helped me see God. I became a Christian because of the influence of godly volunteers in my life who believed in relationships and not just religion.”
What kids want from their leaders

In an act of sheer bravery, I asked a former youth to give me her hold-nothing-back opinion of several years of youth events.

Jules, now a hardworking college student, agreed to discuss the years she spent as one of my students. As we joked about her willingness to speak the truth bluntly, I asked her to tell about her favorite youth events.

She thought for a moment and then replied, “Quite honestly, my entire life was impacted just hanging out with you.”

She went on to explain that though she enjoyed our zany youth events, her life was profoundly affected by spending time next to me, watching me tackle the ups and downs of my life. Through countless hours together, she revealed the relationship of a Christian adult and the mutual sharing of advice, trust, and care between us.

Until then, I disregarded the hours I spent driving kids to events, sitting next to them at football games, and chatting over coffee. It turned out that these daily routines I took for granted offered the biggest testament of faith to Jules.

You see, I’m far from perfect. You only have to see me drive in rush-hour traffic to confirm my many faults. But I learned that one of the most important things I can do as a leader is to invite students into my life. When they see the real me struggle, doubt, and fumble, they relate to me in a deeper way. Because, in the midst of our wreckage as sinful people, the Holy Spirit still works and shines forth through us.

As St. Paul said in 2 Corinthians 12:9, “[The Lord] said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.”

As leaders, it’s our duty to peer beneath the surface of our kids’ lives and recognize what they really need from us. Just like the tiniest tip of an iceberg peaking above the water masks the gigantic mass invisible in the depths below, our students only show us a small portion of who they are, what they’re really thinking, and what their life truly entails.

See the deeper hurts. Whether it’s a cheerful straight-A all-star who cries herself to sleep every night or a cocky football player who desperately wants someone to be proud of him, we have the opportunity to carefully pry away the thick walls of protection our kids have built up and apply the healing balm of the Gospel to their hurting hearts.
It doesn’t matter if you’re the most skilled speaker in the world or write the best lessons since Socrates. If you don’t stay connected to your kids and seek to understand what’s going on beneath the surface, you won’t impact them as you hope.

Very insightful students tell me they deeply value the youth leaders in their lives. Over and over, when I ask what they want most from leaders in their lives, students indicate a desire to have someone to trust and confide in, someone who will love them no matter how badly they mess up.

As teenager Brennen summed up for me, “I want my youth leader to be someone who is easy to talk to and who tells you what you need to know. I need them to be there for me when I need them most and to understand how I feel.”

Several times over the last few years, I asked students what they value most from their leaders. Their answers fall into a few general categories.

**Trust**

Overwhelmingly, students most desire to be able to trust their leaders.

One girl in my small group said it best. “The most important thing I need in a leader is trust. I have to be able to tell them anything and everything.” Our kids need unshakable confidence in us. They need to know we are trustworthy and care enough about them to handle whatever they throw at us.

It can be challenging to hear confidential information about kids, their families, and their situations, but it’s vital to be caring leaders no matter what they tell us. In trusting us, their walls of defense gradually lower and we have the opportunity to help fix broken hearts and hurt feelings.

**Guidance**

Childhood, and especially adolescence, presents some of the most confusing challenges of our lives.

Our students attempt to balance rapidly changing emotional, social, physical, intellectual, developmental, and spiritual changes with brains that aren’t fully developed. No matter how well adjusted a child may seem, he or she still needs a lot of guidance to navigate this difficult journey.

As middle schooler Emily admitted, “I want my youth leaders to be like a friend and to give me wisdom when I need it. I also want to talk to someone who gets my generation and is able to understand our needs.”

In a time when everything seems to be changing, we can offer soothing influence and point to an unchanging Creator. We can remind our students that others have been through the same challenges and survived just fine.
Section 1

Challenge

Our students are sponges, soaking up knowledge quickly. They’re hungry to learn, grow, and be challenged.

One of the most tragic mistakes we make is failing to recognize the potential of our kids. We often do this in the form of the “Oh, someday” phrase: “Oh, someday you’ll be a great leader” or “Oh, someday you’ll actually understand what it means to work hard.” When we say phrases like these to kids, we convey a subtle attitude of superiority.

Why not instead speak the truth now, and encourage kids who already show leadership potential at a young age? Or point out that we appreciate the hard work they put in with homework? Although not “adult issues,” young people already face significant situations. Don’t discount their struggles.

By recognizing personalities, affirming effort, and challenging kids to take the next step in growth, we help inspire a younger generation instead of dismissing them. Our children are far more capable than we give them credit for, so set your standards high for them.

A good listener

Many times, I felt the pang of insignificance when someone I talked with mentally checked out.

You know, that moment when a person lets their eyes roam, looking for other people to converse with.

Scores of kids say one of the most highly desired traits of a youth leader is being a good listener. Actively listening to kids and teens shows that we care about them. Don’t just wait for students to finish talking so you can jump in with your own stories. Pay attention, nod, and ask questions. Sometimes kids just want someone, anyone, to show genuine interest in them.

As one of my youth related, “Just knowing that there is someone there that you can talk to about life in general is comforting.”

Loving support

One of the most poignant responses received from students about what they wanted from their leaders simply stated, “I want them to love me no matter what I do.”

Our kids desperately need our support as they get their balance in this challenging world. On a daily basis, they struggle in a world that makes them second-guess everything about themselves, including their looks, technology, relationships, and young personalities.
As leaders, we need to help lift them up gently when they fall to their knees, wobbly and unsure that they can stand. We must constantly cheer them on and remind them that no matter what happens, they have a loving God who walks with them through the ups and downs of life. And we’re right there in the storms for them too.

Understanding

Kids often think no one in the world quite understands them.

Middle school and high school students especially struggle with feeling misunderstood. They are all too aware that many adults fear working with them. Paradoxically, students long for someone to confide in and someone who will attempt to understand them.

As teenager Erin explained, “I like when a leader understands your thought process and understands what it’s like to be this age.” By asking questions, paying attention to their unique likes and dislikes, and diving into their world, we show that we care about them. Every single person in this world desires to know that they matter. Show your students that they matter to you.

A role model

Many of my students are older now and lead ministries of their own. One of the most delightful experiences of my life was taking my current students, young teenagers from Florida, to a mission organization in St. Louis led by my former students.

As I watched my former students minister to this younger generation, I was blown away by how many of my catchphrases and teaching habits they apparently picked up and absorbed into their persona as leaders.

Parents of children are likely aware of this odd feeling. Imagine hearing your own words from the mouths of others and seeing your actions mirrored by someone else. It’s bizarre!

This experience reminded me afresh of how closely our students study us, and our vast amount of influence on them. Our actions speak volumes to the kids in our lives. Even the smallest unthinking action, such as shaking your fist while driving with kids in your van, or sneaking a cookie when you think no one’s looking, impacts those who watch to see that our words and actions align.

Our students desperately want to look up to caring, thoughtful adults who value them, listen to them, and love and support them. As one of my students confided, “I want someone who I can trust and talk to about my life, someone who really understands and cares about what we think.”

That person who makes such a profound impact in the lives of kids and youth is you.