

What Every Male and Female Youth Worker Needs To Know:

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I'm sure you would agree that males and females think very differently and also that males and females have very different needs. This seems to just be part of the way that God has wired us. I have witnessed not only in my own ministry, but also in the ministry of countless others times when their effectiveness in ministry suffered because they took cross-gender ministry too lightly.

The trend seems to be that the majority of youth workers see their role as serving teen guys and teen girls as very similar. Yet, because God has made guys and girls very different, we need to make sure that we adjust our serving to best meet the needs of these very different genders.

Some will say, "Well, I just don't have the staff or enough help, so I end up doing more cross-gender ministry than I'd prefer." Yet we all know that delegation is something that no matter what ministry environment we are in, we must figure out a way to do it if we are going to lead beyond our own strengths and effectiveness.

Others may say, "Well, I've always been able to reach members of the opposite sex more effectively." But, all of those that I have ever heard use this method, in the long run end up more headaches and compromises than it's worth. I myself used this excuse for many years, saying that "I always could reach teenage girls better than guys," so, I just always put more energy into building disciples out of teen girls. But after doing this for a few years, I found that I greatly underestimated the power of a same-sex mentoring, fed into many teenage girls who craved my attention more than God's, and missed numerous opportunities to serve teen guys that were in desperate need of spiritual direction from an older male figure.

Here are some things to consider if you are in a situation where you are doing cross-gender ministry.

What Every Female Needs to Know About Working with Teen Guys:

So you are a godly woman who now has the opportunity to serve and lead teenage guys. Many youth leaders realize that lust and moral boundaries are a major challenge to the average teen guy. And unfortunately, the struggles with lustful thoughts don't magically turn off when guys step foot into your church. Many youth groups and leaders try to combat the challenge of lust by setting dress codes policies, challenging the girls to dress modestly and in a way that honors God and their brothers in Christ.

But my experience has been that setting a dress code policy or talking to girls about modesty isn't enough to strengthen the moral boundaries of teens. Guys must also be taught how "not to look," that is, how to be disciplined in mind and hear to think on things that are pure and lovely and honorable to Christ.

Consider this journal entry from one teenage guy:

“Every day there seems to be so many different forces trying to get me to look in places where I know my eyes should not go. It starts in the morning when I get on the bus and the girl beside me has incredibly short shorts on - I think about her for the rest of the day and can’t seem to get her off my mind. It continues even more when so many of the girls in my school wear the new “low rise” jeans so that their underwear is always sticking out. The majority of the time, I’m not even trying to look - but it’s everywhere...the other day I was on the computer doing a project for school, and I put the word, “Barbaric” into the google image search, and I couldn’t believe what popped up on the screen. Not to mention half the provocative pictures that the girls in my school put on facebook and myspace.”

How Can You Help Team Guys Learn Not to Look?

- **Build Self-Awareness**: As guys become more and more self-aware just how often they are thinking lustful thoughts, the more they will begin to naturally notice areas of their lives they need to avoid. For example, have the teen guys keep a private journal for one week, where they write down each time they struggle with a lustful thought. At the end of the week, have them write down the categories of the places where they struggled with those thoughts (facebook, playing video games, watching a certain TV show, and so on). Then have them discuss in groups (led by males) how they can avoid some of those situations to decrease or eliminate the temptation.
- **Encouragement**: Using language in your lessons or small group times like, “I know that you guys are bombarded all day long with things to lure your mind astray - stay strong! Remember you were not created for your mind to be tossed around in passionate lust. God has created you to think on things that are holy and honorable.” (1 Thessalonians 4:3-8)
- **Be Creatively Proactive**: Develop projects for the guys in your groups to do that are creative and also proactive in nature. For example, knowing that guys often are tempted with what they see on the internet, having them create mouse pads for the computers at home that have the word “purity” on them, or verses that encourage us to think on things that are honorable and pure (like Philipians 4:8).
- **Reshape their View of the Opposite Sex**: Unfortunately, I’ve learned that many teen guys view girls (especially in youth group) primarily as a potential girl to date, and girls to date for the purpose of physical affection. Even when I was in youth group myself I remember the amazing amount of time and energy I spent as a teen guy thinking about the other girls in the group that I liked and was attempting to get them to like me. The thought that these girls in my youth group were my “sisters in Christ,” was completely foreign to me. Teaching on such

topics (for example, the Family of God, the Church as a Body, and so on) will help teens understand that the goal of youth group is not a social dating service, but an opportunity to form a family. For several years I had one youth group that I was leading address everyone in the group by calling them “Brother (Ben)” or “Sister (Amy).” They loved the idea, and it caught on quickly, and just through changing the nature by which the addressed each other in conversation began to reshape their view of the opposite sex.

- **Get Some Back-Up:** Even though you may be able to have a high impact on teenage guys in ministry, the reality is that you’ll be able to have even a greater impact if you have the help of some mature Christian men. Even some male young adults can provide an environment with teenage guys where accountability and openness to discuss topics of sexuality. Having these men make themselves available at different team meetings, lead a discussion panel, provide their e-mail addresses or cell numbers with help provide you with additional resources to equip teen guys to be able to control any lustful desires they might have.

A Biblical Model for teen discipleship: “Older men mentor younger men, older women mentor younger women.” Titus 2:1-10

What Every Male Youth Leader Needs to Know About Working with Teen Girls

It might be hard to imagine just how deeply every girl desires to be noticed and affirmed, thought of as beautiful, sexy, intelligent, valuable and special. From the moment we wake up in the morning until our heads hit the pillow at night, we are looking for even the smallest sign that someone is noticing us. Perhaps the greatest way that you as a male youth leader can help us a teen girls, is help us to view a healthy view of our own identity. Consider this journal entry from a teen girl:

“As I got dressed today I couldn’t stop but looking at myself from head to toe and hating everything about my body. I felt like a total dork putting the extra padding in my bra, but I’ve made up my mind that all I want to do is look as hot as possible. It does get quite annoying though - I can’t get this question off my mind - ‘Am I the prettiest?’ It felt pretty good today though when Sean - the hottie in my 2nd period class told me, “nice, real fine” today when I walked by. But then when I saw him at lunch flirting with some other girls I just thought to myself, ‘I guess I’m really nothing special. I get to youth group and think we’ll finally be around a guy who cares about the real me. The youth pastor notices my hair and tells me he likes when I straighten it. I make a mental note to straighten it again next week for youth and ask God why He cursed me with curls. I wish I could just look pretty naturally. After the youth pastor’s done his mini sermon I make sure to go up to him afterwards and tell him how good it was. He’s sure to look at me in the eye and pray for me one on one and maybe even put a hand on my shoulder. That warm hand of and older more mature, godly man - its such a rush! Part me hopes he does and wonders if he daydreams about me, but part of me hopes he’s different than the boys at school. Maybe he only cares about my heart and mind. I hope there’s someone out there who isn’t so shallow.”

How Can You Help Teen Girls See Themselves as God Sees Them?

- 1. Verbally Communicate Love and Caring in Group Settings.** I'm sure you realize that many of the girls in your group are starving for love and affection. And, knowing many girls in your group are not receiving love from a father figure, it just makes you all the more want to rise to the challenge. The good news is, you can encourage the girls in your group and verbally express your love and care for them. The caution is this - try not to communicate things like, "I really appreciate you" or "I really love and care about you" or "I'm so proud of you" in one on one settings. These sort of things can be communicated in front of and to the whole group and be so much more beneficial. For one, it avoids a teen girl feeling like you are giving her special attention. But also communicating words of love and care in group settings will avoid you ever being accused of saying something you didn't say.
- 2. Don't flirt!** Knowing that girls are looking to be liked, realize that they will interpret much of your personal interactions with me as something beyond what you may be intending. If you give a girl a specific encouragement, a piggy back ride, make a playful comment, or even just give a look, she could be thinking about it all week. Sometimes it seems that youth leaders think certain jokes or touching are acceptable and even necessary for connecting with teens. The truth is this is perhaps an even more dangerous age group for sending mixed signals, since so much of their processing is subjective. *A good rule of thumb is, if the behavior or words wouldn't be appropriate for you to exchange with your pastor's wife or administrative assistant, it's not appropriate with a teenage girl.*
- 3. Talk About Your Number One Girl.** If you are married (or even engaged), you can really help teen girls realize what is really important in their forming of their identity by talking about what you appreciate, care about, or love about your wife beyond just her physical beauty. Pointing out things like how you appreciate your wife's creativity, companionship or ability to just "go with the flow" can help them see the men don't just care about their body figure and physical appearance.
- 4. Utilize Your Volunteer Women.** Simply the fact that you are an older Christian man in a position of authority over teen girls is powerful and appealing to them. Some of you have the additional challenge of being single and attractive. One of the greatest youth volunteers I ever had in ministry was a middle-aged mother who loved teens (and in fact had two of them herself). Her main role in the youth ministry was to develop a team of 3-5 other women to help serve and make themselves available to the teen girls in the group. This took the pressure of me to feel like I had to meet the needs of the teen girls on my own, and also made it very easy for me to reference a girl to this team of mentors at any time.

5. **Just Girls Fashion Show.** One of the things I've done in youth ministry before that was really successful is we took a night and had it be a night for just girls. The night was two fold. First, we spent some time going through some Scriptures and talking about how God views us as His daughters (Psalm 139:13, Isaiah 43:6-8, Ephesians 2:10). The second part of the night we had a group of girls put on a fashion show of how they can dress hip but remain modest.

In most youth ministry situations, cross-gender ministry is unavoidable. However, God desires to give us wisdom and discernment so that we help build up His Kingdom instead of doing damage to it. Getting your youth volunteers together and brainstorming about how you all can work together to meet the needs of both guys and girls, will help your ministry maintain a high level of integrity in your ministry.