

Youth Ministry is Everyone's Ministry

Shannon Kelly

(Vibrant Faith Ministries, Faith Formation Learning Exchange.net)

Fellow youth ministers and I often joke that we can do anything. . . drive a bus, administer first aid, run a conference, lead a group at the drop of a hat, counsel people, fix toilets, create a meal out of nothing, and more. We are administrators, spiritual guides, fellow explorers, worship leaders, adventurers, boundary setters, retreat leaders, empowerers, listeners, cultural translators, and mentors. To sum it up, using the words of Kenda Creasy Dean and Ron Foster, we are “*Godbearers*.” We are people who juggle all these hats and have learned how to do all these things so that we can be truly present bearers of God’s presence in people’s lives. It is not about being able to “do” all these things, but about being in ministry with youth.

When you are called to serve as a Youth Minister in a congregation, you are called to an important ministry that could shape the life of a teen, a parent, the community, and the congregation. Even though youth ministry is often seen as only fun and games, it is much more than that. You have the potential to be a significant mentor, leader, advocate, and minister in many people’s lives.

Young people in every generation have needed adults who can help them become who they are called to be. Today the stakes are higher and the need for trusted adults is much greater. Today, adults are working more and more to make ends meet; they travel more for work; they can be unsure of how to connect with today’s culture; they may not understand all the things youth are “into;” and they may not feel equipped to minister to teenagers.

Youth ministers have a unique and powerful role in the lives of young people. You are often the adults who youth turn to for advice or for a shoulder to cry on. Youth ministry and the church community can be the place they turn when they are in trouble and teach them about healthy boundaries. It can be the place where they ask questions about life, faith, and relationships in a safe environment. It can be a place where we model responsible, caring, and honest interactions with others.

Ministering to and with youth is not about knowing their culture or knowing all the cool songs. It’s about showing an interest in them, their struggles and joys, their needs and wants, and their world. It’s not about solving their problems for them, but about being a guide, mentor, and a good listener for them to turn to in times of need. You don’t need to go to the latest and greatest conference that will tell you all about youth, their culture, and how to reach them (though training might help you feel more equipped). It’s about showing up, and being real with them and yourself. It’s about being honest that you may not understand where they are coming from, but that you care about them and you want to learn. Ministering to youth means being relational with them. Andrew Root writes “. . . ministry is about connection, one to another, about sharing in suffering and joy, about persons meeting persons with no pretense or secret motives.”

When we connect with young people in a variety of ways, we show them they are valued and a part of our community. As adults in their lives, we have a vital role in equipping them with resources to prepare them for their future. In the same way we plan for the future by looking at financial and educational resources, we also need to equip ourselves and others with our emotional and relational resources. Looking at the Developmental Assets from the Search Institute we can see that there are many ways in which we can support and empower young people. We can help them set healthy boundaries and expectations, and help them understand how to make constructive use of their time. We can demonstrate and encourage a commitment to learning, positive values, social skills and positive identity. Regardless of socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, gender or geographic location all youth need people in their lives who can help them attain these assets.

40 Developmental Assets (Search Institute)

External Assets: Support

1. **Family Support.** Family life provides high levels of love and support.
2. **Positive Family Communication.** Young person and her or his parent(s) communicate positively, and young person is willing to seek advice and counsel from parents.
3. **Other Adult Relationships.** Young person receives support from three or more nonparent adults.
4. **Caring Neighborhood.** Young person experiences caring neighbors.
5. **Caring School Climate.** School provides a caring, encouraging environment.
6. **Parent Involvement in Schooling.** Parent(s) are actively involved in helping the child succeed in school.

External Assets: Empowerment

7. **Community Values Youth.** Young person perceives that adults in the community value youth.
8. **Youth as Resources.** Young people are given useful roles in the community.
9. **Service to Others.** Young person serves in the community one hour or more per week.
10. **Safety.** Young person feels safe at home, school, and in the neighborhood.

External Assets: Boundaries & Expectations

11. **Family Boundaries.** Family has clear rules and consequences and monitors the young person's whereabouts.
12. **School Boundaries.** School provides clear rules and consequences.
13. **Neighborhood Boundaries.** Neighbors take responsibility for monitoring young people's behavior.
14. **Adult Role Models.** Parent(s) and other adults model positive, responsible behavior.
15. **Positive Peer Influence.** Young person's best friends model responsible behavior.
16. **High Expectations.** Both parent(s) and teachers encourage the young person to do well.

External Assets: Constructive Use of Time

17. **Creative Activities.** Young person spends three or more hours per week in lessons or practice in music, theater, or other arts.

18. **Youth Programs.** Young person spends three or more hours per week in sports, clubs, or organizations at school and/or in community organizations.
19. **Religious Community.** Young person spends one hour or more per week in activities in a religious institution.
20. **Time at Home.** Young person is out with friends “with nothing special to do” two or fewer nights per week.

Internal Assets: Commitment to Learning

21. **Achievement Motivation.** Young person is motivated to do well in school.
22. **School Engagement.** Young person is actively engaged in learning.
23. **Homework.** Young person reports doing at least one hour of homework every school day.
24. **Bonding to School.** Young person cares about her or his school.
25. **Reading for Pleasure.** Young person reads for pleasure three or more hours per week.

Internal Assets: Positive Values

26. **Caring.** Young person places high value on helping other people.
27. **Equality and Social Justice.** Young person places high value on promoting equality and reducing hunger and poverty.
28. **Integrity.** Young person acts on convictions and stands up for her or his beliefs.
29. **Honesty.** Young person “tells the truth even when it is not easy.”
30. **Responsibility.** Young person accepts and takes personal responsibility.
31. **Restraint.** Young person believes it is important not to be sexually active or to use alcohol or other drugs.

Internal Assets: Social Competencies

32. **Planning and Decision Making.** Young person knows how to plan ahead and make choices.
33. **Interpersonal Competence.** Young person has empathy, sensitivity, and friendship skills.
34. **Cultural Competence.** Young person has knowledge of and comfort with people of different cultural/racial/ethnic backgrounds.
35. **Resistance Skills.** Young person can resist negative peer pressure and dangerous situations.
36. **Peaceful Conflict Resolution.** Young person seeks to resolve conflict nonviolently.

Internal Assets: Positive Identity

37. **Personal Power.** Young person feels he or she has control over “things that happen to me.”
38. **Self-Esteem.** Young person reports having a high self-esteem.
39. **Sense of Purpose.** Young person reports that “my life has a purpose.”
40. **Positive View of Personal Future.** Young person is optimistic about her or his personal future.

© 1997, 2007 by Search Institute. (<http://www.search-institute.org/content/40-developmental-assets-adolescents-ages-12-18>)

These developmental assets help us think about how we might help youth find the resources, provide the resources, and point them toward resources they will need. The more assets they have, the more likely they are to stay in school, be healthy, and be a good citizen in the community. We have an opportunity to help build these assets each day

Youth ministers have a unique and powerful role in the lives of the church and community as someone who can empower adults and train them to be *Godbearers* and people who will intentionally be asset-builders. When adults in our churches and communities understand the assets and their role in promoting them, our youth and our communities will both benefit.

Engage those Around You

Share the list of assets with the staff and volunteers who work with youth. They need to understand the importance of what they are doing. Some may think what we do is just fun and games (and yes, we do that) but more than that, we are important mentors and guides for the young person. This is true for the lead pastor, congregational staff, volunteer youth ministry leaders, and all the adults in the community with whom youth come in contact. This is true for the adult who never sets foot in the youth room, but knows the names of the teenagers and says hello to them. It is not the youth ministers job to “deal with the youth,” but to be an advocate for the youth, to mentor youth, and to raise awareness of how each person can impact a teenager’s life. Being a *Godbearer* for a young person is not only about teaching them and equipping them to be a good person, but also to be a person of faith.

Exercise: How Can You Be an Asset-Builder?

- ◇ Think back to your own childhood and adolescence. Name all the adults you can think of that were meaningful to you. Why they were meaningful? How did they impact your life?
- ◇ If you didn’t have that many meaningful adults in your life, create a list of what you wished you had in adult leadership as you grew up? How can you be there for youth, knowing how important it is?
- ◇ Now, think of all the children and youth that you know. How can you serve them as those adults served you?
- ◇ What is your part in raising healthy, loving, empowered, strong, passionate, prayerful youth?

What is Your Part?

Everyone in a church, community, and ministry can make a difference in the lives children and youth. Even if you don’t feel equipped or ready to deal with the big issues that youth face today, you can make a difference simply by being a caring person for them. Jolene L. Roehlkepartain has created a list of “150 Ways to Show Kids You Care,” which is a great place to start when getting people involved. Here are my top 25 from that list:

1. Notice and acknowledge them.
2. Learn their names.
3. Ask them about themselves.
4. Listen to them and look in their eyes when you talk to them.
5. Be honest.
6. Be yourself.
7. Play and have fun together.
8. Follow them when they lead.
9. Learn what they have to teach.
10. Show up at their concerts, games, and events.
11. Listen to their favorite music with them.
12. Thank them.
13. Include them in conversations and ask for their opinion.
14. Help them become an expert at something or learn something new.
15. Praise more; criticize less.
16. Be consistent.
17. Applaud their successes.
18. Delight in their uniqueness.
19. Respect them.
20. Create a safe, open environment.
21. Be available.
22. Help them take a stand and stand with them.
23. Expect their best; don't expect perfection.
24. Empower them to help and be themselves.
25. Love them, no matter what.

Begin Today

All of us have a role in engaging, equipping, and guiding young people. We can all build assets. Begin the conversation with those around you. Remember that relationships are key and that asset-building is an ongoing ministry. It is something that needs to be woven into the fabric of the church community so everyone sees their part in helping young people grow and develop. Invite a group of people to look at the Developmental Assets with you and identify where your ministry might begin. Talk to other youth ministers and youth agencies in your community to discover how you might work together. Offer to lead a visioning exercise at your next staff meeting: invite everyone to think about how they can engage youth and about their role in ministry with young people. Find your role, claim it, and encourage others to do likewise.

Works Cited

- Creasy Dean, Kenda, and Ron Foster, *The Godbearing Life*. Upper Room Books, Nashville, 2005.
- Developmental Assets. Search Institute. Minneapolis, 1997, 2007. (To find out more about the Developmental Assets and the research foundation go to: <http://www.search-institute.org/research/assets/assetpower>.)
- Root, Andrew. *Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry: From a Strategy of Influence to a Theology of Incarnation*. Intervarsity Press, Downers Grove, 2007.