

How To: Do Ministry to Christian School Kids

Written by Kaylan Mah (a Christian School kid)

I've always wondered what my life and faith would be like if I hadn't grown up in a Christian home, going to first a Christian elementary school and then a Christian high school. It's really easy to start taking faith for granted when you're surrounded by it. It becomes almost like background noise that you acknowledge but don't engage with because it's just there. However, I've found that church, especially youth group, is a really unique place to learn more about God. Unlike school, most people are there because they want to be, even if it's just to hang out with friends. That means our minds and hearts are open to learn or experience something.

I think there's a lot of expectation that Christian school kids are the ones with strong faiths, and maybe they don't need to be reached out to as much at church. That's not true. Christian education might offer a faith-based perspective to the world, but Christianity is about more than the facts and stories. It's also a relational faith, and teachers can't reach out to every single student.

At this point in life teens are kind of at a crossroads, where they'll either keep pursuing their faith or they'll get bored of it and leave the church. This is why it's so important for you as youth pastors and leaders to be intentional in your interactions with us. Speaking for myself, I want to go deeper. I want to learn from Christians older and more mature than me about how to live out my faith. I want to be empowered and equipped with the tools and wisdom I'll need in my life.

Here are 8 things that I think youth pastors and leaders need to know about ministry to Christian school kids.

1) Dive into the Bible with us; teach us how to read Scripture.

As a Christian school kid I've grown up with all the head knowledge: I can recite the Bible stories, I can tell you about the resurrection of Jesus and I could even share the Gospel with you. But it was only recently that I actually started reading the Bible in bigger chunks, rather than just specially-chosen passages that tell me what I want to hear. It wasn't because of anything anybody told me, it was because I felt a personal need to get to know God that way. I wish I had started earlier because I'm learning so much about the nature of God, our role as Christians in the world, and the life of Jesus.

At church I think it's great to do different series about practical topics that teens should know about, but I want to use my Bible more than just pulling up the app during a sermon. Small groups are an amazing opportunity to connect with others and grow together spiritually, and at least some of this time together should be utilized for Bible study. While answers to different faith-related questions can be helpful, my desire is more to be equipped **to find these answers in Scripture for myself**. Teach us how to read the Bible and understand it, how to think critically about the world in light of God's word and how to interact with an unbelieving society.

2) Find angles to familiar stories and topics that are unique, AND hit us with unfamiliar passages.

Growing up Christian, you end up hearing the same inspirational verses and passages over and over. It kind of desensitizes us to them. Yes it is important to still teach about them, but find unique angles and relate them to our current situations. Try to go beyond the surface level of any given passage. Dig deeper into context with us. Share how this passage impacted your

own life. I personally feel like I take the most away from a lesson when throughout the sermon, or at the end, there are practical points - ways we can live out what we learned.

On top of that, utilize less familiar passages because sometimes hearing something for the first time is what really makes a certain lesson stick.

3) Teach us how to engage with the world.

Growing up going to Christian schools and churches can actually be harmful if we memorize all the typical Christian answers to life questions, but then go out into the world, get hit with what other people believe about life, and realize that our Sunday school answers aren't going to cut it. It can make us question our own beliefs.

Our world is becoming more and more "secular," and we need to know how to engage with the different topics out there. Discuss things like science, politics and entertainment; what we believe about them as Christians, and how we should deal with them in our lives.

For example, discuss questions like:

- How do we follow Jesus' example when interacting with those in the LGBTQ and Liberal communities?
- Are science and Christianity mutually exclusive?
- Is it okay to watch violent movies? Support entertainment with sexual content?

4) Expect maturity from teens.

Don't talk down to us. Go as deep with your teaching as you would with adults, but use illustrations and applications that make sense for teens.

Christian school kids especially can often see through fluff in a message. We decide that we've heard this before, that there's no meat and nothing new you have to offer to us, and we get bored and tune out of the sermon. Give us something we can chew on and even struggle through, and let us know that you're there to discuss anything and answer questions. This leads into the next point.

5) Emphasize the importance of a relationship with God.

Many of the people around me have been in Christian schools for much of their lives. Yet I see them go through so many struggles, and I don't think their faith supports them because it's not real to them. I've heard and seen so much evidence that people have the information about God in their head but don't actually put it into practice. We need to understand the importance of knowing God personally, encouraged to pursue a walk with him, and then taught how we can do that. I think it all comes back to equipping us to pursue God through time in the Word and in prayer.

6) We need intentional mentoring and discipling.

Discipleship and mentorship is a huge thing that is often overlooked. I think many people (of any age) have a need for someone to come alongside them in their faith journey, but they don't realize it or don't know how to move forward finding someone who can help them.

In the Great Commission, Jesus told his disciples (and us) to "Make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19) and he goes on to instruct them to teach everyone to obey all he has commanded. The Great Commission is often used in the context of Christians telling unbelievers about God, but the word "disciples" is used here. Jesus' own disciples had a mentor: Jesus himself. The discipleship he models is important to follow in the church, and I think there is so much benefit in starting young.

As teens we're going through changes and hard things in life, and yes we can turn to God, but sometimes what really helps is talking to someone older and more mature who has gone through similar things, or someone who can just guide you through it and keep you accountable and on track with your faith. It's different from small groups, where the leader can only engage so much with each member. **One-on-one mentoring or smaller groups for regular discipleship** are something I think people like me could really benefit from.

Sometimes it's hard for a student to reach out to a leader or someone older. Maybe they feel a need for guidance but aren't quite sure exactly what they need. That's where intentionality comes in. They need someone reaching out to them. It can be as simple as someone asking how they are, and then taking time to engage in a deeper conversation.

Sometimes students put up this "I want to talk, but it takes time" wall. How do you push through it? First of all, **show you care about us**. Ask questions, not to be nosy, but to show interest in our lives. My youth pastor has this thing where he asks about our **love, life and faith**.

It's usually hard to bring up hard topics, even if there's something we want to share, whether it's to get advice or just get the words out. In conversations, show us that you're willing to talk about things that go beyond surface level. When a student sees a leader being vulnerable, sharing their own stories and struggles, it makes it easier to open up about ourselves.

I know that youth leaders or anyone older can't be expected to know intuitively how to mentor someone. I think it should be something that's talked about more, and my church took a big step in the right direction with a conference on discipleship. It can be really beneficial to have practical training sessions on how to be a mentor and speak into the lives of others walking with Christ.

7) Remind us that doubt is okay.

I think there are many people out there who have doubts about Christianity. But they see those around them owning their faith and think "why don't I have it together like them?" It makes them think that they don't belong, that they're not "real" Christians.

We need to be told that it's okay to have doubts and questions. It doesn't mean that we're not believers or that our faith is somehow less than everyone else's. That's why it's so important for youth group to be a safe community, a place where it's okay to be vulnerable and admit that we don't know or understand everything, whether or not we've grown up with Christianity. Create a space where it is okay for us to ask questions, even basic ones that "you should know already."

I also think that many people leave the church because they've heard the same things over and over and it becomes boring or unmeaningful. But don't worry that we'll end up questioning our faith. You don't have to tailor your sermons or lessons to be nice and pretty, so that nobody will feel convicted or challenged or confused at the end. The important thing to remember is that **God is a big God and he's big enough to be questioned**. Let that happen.

8) Challenge us.

This connects to several of the points above. It's true that many people who go to youth group are there to have fun with friends, but there are also those who desire a deeper relationship with God and need direction with that. Challenge them to grow deeper in Christ. While it's important to be drawing in non-believers with events where people can just hang out, eat food and play games, I think youth pastors and leaders should make an effort to seek out the kids who are truly serious about their faith and focus on challenging them.

It can go beyond this too. There are students out there who not only want to grow their own faith, but care about reaching others. Whether or not our friends are Christian, we've all been placed by God in a unique situation, able to reach a unique group of people. As my pastor likes to say, **students are the best equipped to reach students**. This is why student leadership is important. Guide us in the best ways we can influence others through our words and actions.

Start Small

Maybe the points I mentioned above seem totally overwhelming to you, or maybe you feel like you're doing great at all of them already. I encourage you to think and pray about all of these things, because there is always room for growth. And as youth group kids we're not just statistics or projects, we're people.

I think the first step and perhaps the most important way to reach us Christian school kids, or anyone else, is by being intentional about relationship. I'm going back to the point about mentorship for a moment. It can seem like a big intimidating thing. But mentorship really is about engaging with us on a personal level, not just "hi I'm your small group leader, let's read the Bible together" but caring about our lives and our growth as people and Christians. We're relational beings, so I think the most important place to start is by showing us that we're loved, and then going from there.