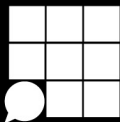




NO TEENAGER LEFT BEHIND

10 Hard-to-Handle Teenagers
and How to Break Through with Them

BY LENEITA FIX



AN **EVERYDAY YOUTH MINISTRY**
RESOURCE FROM SIMPLY YOUTH MINISTRY

:: THE VOICE OF THE IN-THE-TRENCHES YOUTH WORKER

No Teenager Left Behind

10 Hard-to-Handle Teenagers and How to Break Through With Them

Copyright © 2012 Leneita Fix

group.com

simplyyouthministry.com

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any manner whatsoever without prior written permission from the publisher, except where noted in the text and in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, visit group.com/customer-support.

Credits

Author: Leneita Fix

Executive Developer: Nadim Najm

Chief Creative Officer: Joani Schultz

Copy Editor: Rob Cunningham

Cover Art and Production: Riley Hall and Veronica Preston

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are taken from the *Holy Bible*, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996, 2004, 2007. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

Printed in the United States of America.

Dedication

This book is dedicated to all of us who have muddled our way through adolescence. It is for those of us that struggled to believe that we could be anything more than a mess. Then Jesus showed up with the truth and set us free. It is for those kids who cannot find and have not found that freedom quite yet.

There are four sets of people who have been telling me forever that I should write this book. Thank you. This book is dedicated to you.

- My parents, who love me in spite of myself.
- My husband, who has the ability to see and cherish the “real” me, no matter what.
- My children, who inspire me daily to show them in whose image they are made.
- Finally, this is for my dear friends Craig and Lynn Ann Bogard. Thanks for 40-plus years of service to “those kids.” Your training and influence changed me and transform me still to see who each one can and will be.



Contents

Chapter 1: Who Is “That Kid”?	1
Chapter 2: Some Initial Thoughts	15
Chapter 3: So I’ve Heard About Jesus <i>The Unchurched Kid</i>	21
Chapter 4: I’m President of My Class, Valedictorian, Captain of the Sports Team, and Oh Yeah, There’s Youth Group <i>The Overextended Kid</i>	29
Chapter 5: LOOK AT ME! LOOK AT ME! <i>The Attention-Seeking Kid</i>	39
Chapter 6: I Don’t Hate You; I’m Just Mad at the World <i>The Defiant Kid</i>	47
Chapter 7: I Found Ya! <i>The Clingy Kid</i>	57
Chapter 8: My Hand Is Out; Fill It! <i>The Entitled Kid</i>	67

Chapter 9: Proud to Be a Pharisee	
<i>The Legalistic Kid</i>	75
Chapter 10: So What if You Really Believe in Me?	
<i>The Complacent Kid</i>	83
Chapter 11: No Matter How Hard I Try, I'm Just Not Cool	
<i>The Socially Awkward Kid</i>	93
Chapter 12: I'm Dying Inside	
<i>The Hurting Kid</i>	101
Chapter 13: Moving Out From Under the Green Sky	109



CHAPTER 1:

WHO IS “THAT KID”?

I have a question for you. Sit and think about it for a second; close your eyes and ponder. Which student makes you supremely uncomfortable to be around? The one that you hope won't show up this week—and then causes you to feel guilty when you're glad they don't. The one who pushes your buttons and makes you want to scream or quit or both. The one you don't know how to reach so you avoid—or maybe it's the one you haven't noticed.

Now open your eyes. Were you laughing or sweating as the name or names came to mind?

These are the students that you pretend you are too busy for. They are the ones that are lost and you feel totally unqualified to reach. Yet you know what they need is to be loved.

I was “that kid.” You probably wouldn't have thought it, though.

I always felt like problems needed to stay behind closed doors. No matter what was going on at home, I would never tell. I wouldn't tell you that my sister's disability often made me feel like she was the one who got all of

the attention. When my parents fought or when I fought with them (which was often), you would never know. When my parents filed for bankruptcy, life barely skipped a beat. I genuinely thought that if I could at least get the best grades, be well-behaved, and be a star of some kind, then life would be all right.

No matter how I tried, I never thought the “popular” kids accepted me. I was entirely insecure all the time. It didn’t help that in elementary and middle school I was notoriously teased and bullied. It only added to the magnification of my perceived defects. Walking down my school’s halls, I was sure that the world was pointing and laughing. If I even messed up a little, the secret would get out that I was still that same clumsy kid who had “bug eyes” and “cried all the time.” I wasn’t about to let that happen in high school. If you weren’t going to accept me for who I was, at least I could learn to hide it well.

For a number of reasons, my family stopped going to church when I was in middle school, but we started up again for a brief time when I was in high school. I had “asked Jesus into my heart” when I was 5. However, I don’t think I understood how to truly rely on him until I

was about 20. By that time I had gotten really good at two things:

1. Keeping everyone who might “find me out” at arms length.
2. Waiting for the world to call me out on how flawed I really was.

When we went back to church, the youth pastor didn't have time for me. I tried to go through the motions of being the “good kid,” and he bought it. I was hungering for him to see through the façade, but he didn't. I remember opening up to a volunteer on a ski trip we once took. It felt so good to finally get out my feelings. The volunteer promised to follow up but never did. It left me feeling vulnerable and exposed. Obviously I was too much of a mess for that person, too.

Who was I? I was the overextended kid who hid in activities. I was the hurting kid. I was the legalist keeping my list of do's and don'ts. I saw myself as socially awkward. The students you had in mind a few moments ago? I was a bunch of them wrapped into one.

God eventually brought me into a youth ministry career. My heart was drawn to those kids like me, the ones who hung on the fringes. Somehow those deemed “unlovable” ended up being the majority of the students attracted to my groups.

I successfully entered an arena where I never had any idea what I was doing. There were kids that left me tongue-tied, kids who left me feeling helpless, kids I didn’t like, and kids I hoped to never see again. I had no idea there would be a kid I didn’t want to see.

The age-old debate over why we are the way we are is often called “Nature vs. Nurture.” Where do we place blame? Is it the way we were born or the way we are raised? In his book *Hurt: Inside the World of Today’s Teenagers*, Chap Clark talks about systematic abandonment. Many adolescents today feel like they have been deserted by every adult and by a system that was meant to keep them safe. Parents push their children to excel in everything from sports to academics to community service. Coaches and teachers want them to “get ahead.” Extended family and mentors are rarely present. Kids are dropped off at youth group, where they can “get Jesus.” These adolescents feel they have been

“systematically” passed off to a bunch of grown-ups with agendas for envisioned success. The result is that kids believe there are no safe adult relationships. In short, if these children just had better care, then they would be different.

But then I met some students who were nurtured well. Two loving parents loved them, and it felt like everyone tried to lift them up. Yet it still seemed to be in their wiring to be different. Could it be just be their “nature?” Psalm 139:13-14 certainly could point us in that direction. *You made all the delicate, inner parts of my body and knit me together in my mother’s womb. Thank you for making me so wonderfully complex! Your workmanship is marvelous—how well I know it.*

In the midst of all of this is the very real developmental stage of adolescence. This is an age that spans anywhere (depending on who you talk to) from 9 to 22 years of age. This time of life is marked by insecurity and awkwardness. Some hide it behind risk-taking while others muddle through with barely audible communication abilities.

The Bible told me to love all of these students as myself. Yet often this was a challenge. I wish it were as simple as

blaming the nature (the way they are made), the nurture (the way they are brought up and influenced), or just the growing pains of development. So I began to analyze myself and my own pain from the teen years. What made me “that kid”?

It was as if all of me had been thrown into a plastic bag and shaken up. I was made to be who I was. At the same time, living in a fallen world with fallen people had affected me greatly. If it made me this way, then chances were that others felt the same way. I couldn't possibly understand all of the millions of combinations that made students who they were.

I had been looking at all of this through the wrong lens. Instead of avoiding them, I needed to start seeing teenagers as Christ sees each of them—and each of us. *“No eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no mind has imagined what God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Corinthians 2:9).*

As a teenager I lived like an orphan of God. I had no idea that being God's child meant that I had total access to God's love. Living like an outsider to God's grace took a toll on my life and my identity. I didn't

understand the full extent of my position as a child of God. I didn't understand what it meant to belong. My own transformation came when I embraced who I was and whose reflection I was created to be—when nature and nurture collided with my need to experience salvation through Jesus.

Just this week, I was leading a small group on the topic of identity in Christ. Students were asked to recognize and share their strengths and talents. Many were clamoring over themselves to talk. One young man, however, with downturned eyes responded with, "I got nuthin." No matter how I tried, it was painful for him to acknowledge that he was worthwhile and created for more. I have known him for years. He has grown up in an inner-city household struggling in poverty, with no father. He has a stutter that causes him to trip over communication. In his mind he is worthless.

God has a plan for this teenager. God has a call for each of us. Not every student who feels worthless will tell us. We must let them know that there is no one "too much" or "not enough" to be loved and used by Christ. Even with our mangled hearts, Christ calls us to redemption. The words of Jeremiah 29:11 are for all of us, every single day

of our lives: *“For I know the plans I have for you,” says the Lord. “They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope.”* Jesus wants to hold this generation close.

I wish that at 16, I had learned that Jesus works for us and with us. Christ uses each of us and what we are not, to become who we are for his sake. Remember the words of 1 Corinthians 1:26-28. *Remember, dear brothers and sisters, that few of you were wise in the world’s eyes or powerful or wealthy when God called you. Instead, God chose things the world considers foolish in order to shame those who think they are wise. And he chose things that are powerless to shame those who are powerful. God chose things despised by the world, things counted as nothing at all, and used them to bring to nothing what the world considers important.* This speaks to the reality that all of us, no matter what or where we come from, are made for so much more. If our teenagers discovered and embraced their identity in Christ now, how would that change their schools, our culture, our society, and the world?

Christ reminded us that it is easy to love people who love us. We all want to hang with that “undemanding”

kid. However, Jesus went on to teach that true love is demonstrated when we love our enemies—or “difficult” people.

Many youth workers aren’t naturally drawn to these students. If that describes you, chances are that the most challenging students are not chasing you down. That means the ball is in your court to notice and pour into them.

This book will help you do just that. Get to know the students. Each has a name. None should be left behind.

Close your eyes again. Picture the teenager that makes you uneasy. What is the underlying stuff that is going on? If you could name the problem, what is it? Is this student clingy, unchurched, defiant, overextended, legalistic, dramatic, or entitled?

We are about to meet these students. Each story is based on either one student or several actual teenagers I have known through the years, and names have been changed to ensure confidentiality. As you read, cross out the name I’ve given this teenager and write in the name of your student to make it more personal. Some of the

details of your own situations will be different. Don't be afraid to take notes. Then take the next steps at the end of each chapter and try them out. I promise that as you see that these students are the Creator's created, your perspective will be changed.

I love the story a friend shared with me. Her child is a socially awkward kid. Recently he admitted that he was being bullied, but he wouldn't say who was bullying him. The mom did what all good parents do and called the youth pastor. No, she didn't expect him to "fix" it, but she needed some help. His response was so amazing: "Your son is compassionate and empathetic. He can see those in the world that others have missed. Jesus wasn't popular. Jesus stood out because he could see and love the 'have-nots' of society. We need to let your son understand how much he looks like Christ."

The youth pastor's ability to see this boy with the eyes of Jesus is changing everyone. The student has more than one person pouring truth into him. He is learning who he is in Christ. Mom feels supported and encouraged that someone else sees her son as she does. The youth worker has changed the entire way he looks at teenagers as a whole. He has recently modified how he does some

programming to celebrate all of his students and to help them feel included.

When we take this on, it transforms us, it transforms individual students, and it transforms a generation. If teenagers can grasp the truth of who they are in Christ, then they will live vibrantly for God at a younger age and with greater commitment. I think our jobs would change drastically from convincing them to teaching them to lead. Don't you?

CHAPTER 2:

**SOME INITIAL
THOUGHTS**

How do we reach out and help teenagers see Christ in their reflection? Sometimes we can live our whole lives defining ourselves through the lens of what we are NOT. This is the case with our most “challenging” students. Think of this quote by Albert Einstein: “Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid” (mindbodygreen.com/0-2878/Albert-Einstein-Everybody-Is-a-Genius.html). If teenagers spend the better part of their lives with the notion that they can’t “get it right,” then they think they never will. This makes some students extremely vulnerable. When we enter the world of our students, we must start with some basics.

As leaders working with teenagers, we must learn to be proactive more than reactive. What do I mean?

A student enters our group for the first time. We immediately identify that this one is going to be “trouble.” We hold our breath and hope it all turns out well. The student acts the way we were dreading or expecting. We discipline the teenager and hope that he or she will not return to cause problems. This is “reactive.”

Let’s look at the same scenario in a “proactive” light.

Instead of waiting it out, we go to the student the moment he or she enters. We start with small talk. We may have zero in common. It might feel flat the first time we try this approach. But we have opened the door for deeper conversation as time goes on. The next time the student comes, we can ask about a specific TV show or the latest movie he or she had planned to see.

Each time the teenager returns, we are purposeful. Knowing a student requires more than a minute-long drive-by conversation. We must create space to listen. We must practice good eye contact to demonstrate our interest and concern.

As we hear their stories unfold, we must be cautious. Compassion is important. Yet students don't always need "saving." I imagine it like a superhero with the cape flying in the wind. With a barreling voice and rippling muscles, we scream, "I AM HERE TO SAVE THE DAY!" The student gives that "deer-caught-in-the-headlights" stare. "Save me from what?" they wonder. Many times what a kid needs most is merely our presence.

As we point them to Jesus, we must speak clearly and do our best to avoid language that wouldn't be heard outside of church walls. At church, we say things like "Pray without ceasing" or "Humble yourself before the Lord." Those are meaningful statements, but many times students don't know either what we are talking about or how to apply it to their lives. Speak in plain language that makes sense to a teenager, and be ready for follow-up and clarifying questions.

And just because teenagers have grown up in the church doesn't mean they have taken to heart all that they've heard. Maybe they have heard those words "Jesus loves you" a million and one times, like I did, yet still struggle accepting the truth of that statement. There is a chance it has simply rattled around inside and never made sense to them. "Everyone else hates me. I hate me. How can Jesus love me?" Just saying the words may mean little. Instead, in our time with the student, we probe a little to see if he or she believes in the words of Christ.

We must practice the discipline of embracing empathy and dissipating criticism. My youth program is made up primarily of inner-city kids. Many of them have lived hard

lives. This creates a specific culture for our group. Yet in the midst of it there are students who have grown up in loving Christian homes. I can't place assumptions based on what I see.

Last night I asked one student why he comes. "You guys love us no matter what," he answered. I am very aware of how some kids might not feel welcome right away. Intentionally we break down "cliques" in an attempt to ensure that every student can be welcomed into our group.

Entering the world of these kids gives us a fresh viewpoint into the way God can mold someone into his image. Thanks for joining me in the journey. Let us commit to leaving no teenager behind.

CHAPTER 3:

SO I'VE HEARD ABOUT JESUS

The Unchurched Kid

Tony and his friends had stumbled into the community outreach at church that spring. Riding their bikes to trouble, the free food had caught their eyes and stomachs.

When I first met Tony, he was covered in pink spun sugar. He apparently had no idea that it is virtually impossible to look “rough and tough” while holding a cone of cotton candy. Sure his pants were a little too sagging. His shirt was about five sizes too big, while a ball cap was purposely tipped to the side. His soft smile, although he attempted to glare at me, let me know there was a soft heart deep within. I guess that is why I asked him if I might tag along and show him what the outreach held beyond eating.

By the end of the event, Tony had promised to return to youth group the following week.

Sure enough, that Wednesday he showed up. I could see fear beneath his hardened exterior. Would he be accepted within the church walls?

Some students were skeptical of him. They knew his reputation and weren't certain if they were allowed to

like Tony. But I invited him in, and a couple of my student leaders let him know they were glad he was there. That night Tony heard the gospel for the first time.

Pressing me afterward, he wanted to know if this love was true. Could Jesus truly want a relationship with him? His eyes darted as he drew closer. “Does God know I am a thug?” he whispered. By the end of our time, Tony had decided to follow Christ. He exchanged his sin for new life!

As Tony joined our youth group, I was unprepared for him. He didn’t always know when it was appropriate to be loud and then quiet down. As we studied the Bible, he appeared bored. When I asked him about it, Tony admitted that he couldn’t always understand the conversation.

Then there was his home life. I found out he had never met his father. His mom was either exhausted or disinterested. But she worked two jobs and went to school at night. There were times when Tony showed up with his younger siblings because he was left at home as the “man of the house.” I found that I needed to take the time to get to know his whole family. I started by having his mom and all the kids over for dinner.

After hearing from Tony almost daily for months, my phone went totally silent. When I tried to call his number, it had been disconnected. When I drove over to his house, I found Tony with his old friends. He knew where that would lead. I was so confused; I thought he chose Jesus?

Just a couple of weeks earlier, I had seen Tony at the altar crying out to God after church. He told me, “I want the Lord; I just don’t know how to really get him to understand my everyday life.”

I love this kid. I can tell his commitment to Christ was true and is true. However, each thread I pull causes the fabric of who he is to unravel a little more. Where do I start? Do I help him learn the Bible, make different friends, understand that Christ does “get it”? What about all the other kids in my group who need me? What do I do?

Tony represents those students who didn’t grow up in church yet are in our youth ministries now. I love it when they first arrive. The soil is ripe because they have genuinely never heard about Christ before. But with time, things start to get complicated. There are so many gaps in their grasp of the Lord. There are the foundational Bible stories they missed hearing as a child. They aren’t

familiar with the way Christians can speak a language unfamiliar to people on the outside. Unchurched teenagers like Tony—and unchurched adults, for that matter—have never learned the traditions I call “normal.” And the reality of walking out a daily relationship where God is in control is an entirely new concept. This is why we must take a coaching attitude with these students.

One-on-one relationship is vital to see true long-lasting change in the lives of students like Tony. Taking the time to answer questions in-depth outside programmed settings helps tremendously. Our time with these students must be focused and purposeful. The concept of choosing to follow Christ may sound easy. However, the idea that he now wants our “whole selves” is new. Jesus wants to be their Savior and their Lord; we must teach them what this means. We must provide consistent examples of what this looks like both by showing and by telling them.

Tony needs to understand that he is a brand-new creation. I find great strength and hope when studying 2 Corinthians 5:14-17 with him: *Either way, Christ’s love controls us. Since we believe that Christ died for all, we also believe that we have all died to our old life. He died*

for everyone so that those who receive his new life will no longer live for themselves. Instead, they will live for Christ, who died and was raised for them. So we have stopped evaluating others from a human point of view. At one time we thought of Christ merely from a human point of view. How differently we know him now! This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!

Next Steps:

- **Remind them of God's grace.** Help these students understand that having a relationship with Christ is based on grace and mercy. They are allowed to make mistakes without needing to “rededicate” their lives to the Lord every time they mess up.
- **Ask questions.** “Why are you making your choices?” Remind them that while in Christ they are a new creation, this does not give them an excuse to live however they want. Instead it gives them the freedom to start over each time they make mistakes with the knowledge that they are forgiven.

- **Show how to make better choices.** How can they practically choose the right friends or spend their time wisely? How can they make Christ-focused decisions that draw them closer to God? How can they pray and have devotional time?
- **Explain your culture and traditions.** Are there times they should stand or sit in silence? Make sure someone takes time to tell them what you do and why you do (and don't do) certain things in your church or group.
- **Teach the Word.** Their lives will be changed as they get to know the person of Christ. Make sure they have a translation of the Bible that is readable, and then encourage them to take it home and take it in. Don't just hand them a Bible. Teach them how to read and study it and know God through Scripture.
- **Remember that this is a process.** Be patient. Keep having conversations that help these students make Jesus the center of their lives. Jesus wants to be their Savior and their Lord; teach them what this means.

CHAPTER 4:

**I'M PRESIDENT OF MY
CLASS, VALEDICTORIAN,
CAPTAIN OF THE
SPORTS TEAM, AND OH
YEAH, THERE'S YOUTH
GROUP**

The Overextended Kid

Becca forgot to take off her cleats before coming into church—again. However, I'm thrilled she is even here tonight. This kid is a natural-born leader, fun and vibrant. The challenge is that Becca is involved in way too many things.

Some might call her an overachiever. Others might say she just can't say no to any and all activities. All I know is that I am watching a 16-year-old who seems to be on the verge of burnout. I wonder if there's ever been an unplanned moment in her life. I am concerned she doesn't remember what she likes to do for "fun" anymore.

A typical week for Becca includes sports practice almost every day, plus games several times a week. She's team captain of both a fall sport *and* a spring one. On top of that, she worked hard to get voted class president this year, and during the off-season for sports, she goes out for the winter musical. At the same time, she wants everyone in her high school to understand the power of volunteering. She has led campaigns for a Christmas toy drive for needy children, built a community garden, and organized a citywide graffiti clean-up day.

Oh, and did I mention that she's likely to be valedictorian?

Becca tells me she stays busy because she wants to get into college but has to find a way to pay for it because her parents can't afford it. If she can just get the right set of scholarships, then she just might make it. It's no longer "just about the grades," Becca reminds me often. The schools are looking for "well-rounded" and "committed" individuals.

What's frustrating is that due to everything she is involved in, it feels like youth group is at the bottom of the pile. Last week, I got an email from her parents telling me she could no longer attend Thursday night Bible studies; they were signing her up for extra SAT prep classes. When I wrote back and said I thought Becca really enjoyed the Bible study and I would be happy to be her SAT tutor, I got a seething reply. Couldn't I just understand that Becca needs to be more concerned about her future?

I don't think Becca doesn't love Christ. I think she is being pushed. She is incredibly driven to be "successful," and her parents are trying to safeguard her future. At the same time, Becca is attempting to escape the fighting that is constant in her home due to financial stresses.

I really want to help Becca know that Jesus isn't just one more thing to "get done" in the course of a day. He wants a relationship with her. I know she believes me, but I just don't think she has any idea how to make him the center of everything in a real way.

From a selfish perspective, I want Becca to commit to me and to the youth group. I can be judgmental that her parents don't really care. Yet if I pressure her, I become "one more thing" on her plate. I need to accept that youth group might need to be that thing she has the freedom to NOT attend.

The hardest place to begin is to help her find ways to ease her schedule and make life a little less stressful. If her parents are the ones setting the course, I need to ensure that I am respecting their wishes. Becca and I sat down together and had a long, hard conversation about her calendar. What did she REALLY need to be a part of? I also asked her if she was doing more so she could avoid being home. We spent some time discussing what it means to make Christ a priority. Did she know he loves her for WHO she is more than for WHAT she achieves?

Becca wrote out every single thing that she's involved in. I started to see that she is a people pleaser. It would make her parents love her more if she was successful, her teachers exalt her if she was always smartest, and the colleges say yes if she never said no.

Then we looked at the list. I had her add a star next to everything she really loved to do. Those activities would stay. Looking through everything else, what *could* go? For example, while she had made the commitment to hold a student council position for a whole year, she didn't HAVE to volunteer EVERY Saturday. We had a long, hard conversation on how we can't do it all. This is not a conversation I would have with every teenager.

After this I asked her to talk with her parents about how she was feeling. Becca admitted she was really overwhelmed. I suggested that she go to her parents with a plan on what she needed to drop, along with ideas on how and why to do it. I also suggested that if she was nervous about talking to teachers or coaches, to ask her parents to go with her. If they couldn't, then I would.

Probably our toughest conversation was about the concept of allowing God to be totally in charge of our

future. I explained the truth of Scripture like Proverbs 16:9—*We can make our plans, but the Lord determines our steps.* I don't think Becca really wants to hear that right now. But I would rather let her know now that the best way to “get ahead” is to be totally the Lord's.

Becca needs to see who ultimately has plans for her and why. We looked at James 4:13-15 together: *Look here, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we are going to a certain town and will stay there a year. We will do business there and make a profit.” How do you know what your life will be like tomorrow? Your life is like the morning fog—it's here a little while, then it's gone. What you ought to say is, “If the Lord wants us to, we will live and do this or that.”*

Next Steps:

- **Make it easier.** One of my friends runs his youth programming on Sundays instead of a midweek night. Keeping youth group on the same day as church and removing other scheduling obstacles can help more of these kids attend.

- **Focus on Jesus.** Teach these students that following Jesus is not another activity but a relationship to nurture. Can they do a devotional when their homework is done in a study hall? Could they listen to an audio Bible? How can they get to know Jesus on an ongoing basis, in the midst of their busy lives?
- **Create times of fun.** Continue to invite them to times that are designed for just hanging out and having fun. They may have neglected doing this regularly and consistently.
- **Plan and communicate well.** Put together a calendar that allows students (and parents) to know important youth events months out. This will help them arrange or rearrange their schedules. Ask students to submit dates that are “bad times” for retreats, special events, and camps. Attempt to work with their schedules.
- **Help them with “Do Nothing but Jesus” times.** Take an afternoon with an overextended student and spend it together praying, hiking, or learning to just be with God.

- **Find one-on-one opportunities.** Could you pick up one of these students one day a week before school and do a Bible study together? Are there other natural, organic times of connecting? Keep working with them to let them know they matter to you as a person.
- **Don't give up.** Sometimes these students are the ones that most need to know that they matter more than the stuff they do.

CHAPTER 5:

LOOK AT ME! LOOK AT ME!

The Attention- Seeking Kid

They are the “dynamic duo.” Someday they may both make a lot of money in Hollywood. Bo will be in comedies, while Lucy just might win an Oscar® for her dramatic skills. Both have one thing in common: They want—maybe even need—to be the center of attention. They might as well stand up every time I have youth service and yell, “Look at me!”

Bo is your typical class clown. He makes a joke about everything. The first time I met him, he was hilarious; I’d never met a kid who had such a great use of sarcasm. But as I spent more time with him, I realized it was less about “timing” and more about being the first with a comeback—TO EVERYTHING. It feels like every week I am pulling him aside to give a lesson in appropriate and inappropriate responses. Sometimes I can see the annoyance when others want to be quiet with God but Bo won’t let it happen.

He wants so desperately to be popular, and it is obvious that he thinks being the funniest one in the room will make it happen. Other times it feels like it is a blatant way to hide his insecurities. If he can laugh at himself before anyone else does, then perhaps he won’t hurt. He doesn’t seem to care if the laughs are negative or not. I want him

to know how cool he is even when he isn't the center of attention.

Then there is Lucy, my "drama queen." A hangnail requires us to call an ambulance. A student accidentally knocks into her, and the whole world hates her. She can manage to make every single situation about her. Once we were together at a huge vocal recital for her best friend. Lucy knew that it was a big deal for her friend. Just before the girl went on, Lucy told me she felt faint. She stood up, tripped over everyone in the row, and ran to the bathroom. I followed to make sure she was all right. Crashing into the bathroom, she threw herself onto the cold ground, draping her arm over her head: "I think I am going to die."

As I tended to her with cold compresses, the bathroom filled with other adults and students checking in to make sure she was going to be OK. In the meantime, we missed her friend's performance. Thankfully, due to a speaker system in the bathroom, I at least heard it. It isn't that I didn't want to help Lucy; I just honestly had no idea if this was "for real" or not. Things like this happen so often that I grapple with having compassion anymore. It seems like

no matter how much attention Lucy gets, it simply is not enough.

Both Bo and Lucy take so much of my time and focus. I keep wondering why they require so much attention. Is there something going on at home that I just can't see? Bo's parents are divorced; Lucy's parents appear to be strong Christians.

Are they both just afraid that they might become invisible if they don't make sure they are seen? Is it just a way of controlling the type of attention they get? I simply want to love these kids; I just have no idea how to show as much interest in them as they would like from me.

Recently I have started to help both of them understand the difference between healthy and unhealthy attention. I'm learning that there are times I have to ignore when they try to be the "main attraction." At the same time I make sure to celebrate on the sidelines who they are. When they are just being themselves, I tell them pointedly what I love about them.

My quest is for them to take to heart who they are in Christ. He loves them individually and wonderfully. They

need to know (and rest in) the reality that there is a Savior that is truly their “biggest fan” no matter what they do. God planned their lives, ordered their days, blotted out their sins, and brought them close. Once they understand their place as God’s children, the need for undue attention will start to take a back seat.

I’ve spent time with Bo and Lucy looking at Isaiah 43. The passage begins with a reminder about how we belong to God: *But now, O Jacob, listen to the Lord who created you. O Israel, the one who formed you says, “Do not be afraid, for I have ransomed you. I have called you by name; you are mine” (Isaiah 43:1).*

Next Steps:

- **Nip the drama.** Stop gossiping or backbiting that feeds a need for negative attention, both from them and about them.
- **Let them lead.** When students are always trying to be the center of everything, redirect their efforts to something else. Can they direct an outreach? Could they lead the skits in your group? Give them spaces

where they know they are needed and wanted—times when being “noticed” is appropriate.

- **Offer sideline affirmations.** Pull them aside and tell them why you love having them in your group. Pour the truth into them about what Christ thinks of them consistently and constantly. Make sure you are looking them in the eye when you talk. This helps them know they have you fully when you are in conversation.
- **Provide focused time.** Look for opportunities when you can spend time with them and focus your attention on them. Let them have moments when they can be the most important, at least for a short time.
- **Create family nights.** Set up nights at church where students and their parents interact and spend time together. Students seeking attention often feel like they have to “perform” to be noticed. (Do all you can do to get parents there; avoid any “they won’t come” attitudes.) Make these times simply about a meal or ways parents and teenagers can just be together.

CHAPTER 6:

I DON'T HATE YOU; I'M JUST MAD AT THE WORLD

The Defiant Kid

We stood by the van as Moriah ranted at me. This young woman towered over me, one hand on her hip while the other flailed near my face. Her voice became higher pitched as the volume rose. Life was unfair; I was unfair. I put my nose in “everyone else’s business,” she said. When I had asked her to take a seat in the van, I was “calling her out in front of everyone,” she said. She continued to scream, until it finally ended with the vow that she would never come to youth group again. We both knew that I would see her next week. This tantrum happened entirely because she had no desire to go home at the end of the day. Moriah and I had been down this path many times.

The first time I spotted Moriah, I did a heart check. I couldn’t tell if the scowl on her face was permanent or just there for effect. While I didn’t want to stereotype her, she was doing all that she could to appear rough around the edges.

As I walked up to introduce myself, the first words out of her mouth were, “I’m just here cuz I have to be,” and then she slumped into a chair at the back of the room. Should I let her be or push in? I followed her and sat next to her, asking where she found the color of nail polish she

had on. She quipped, “Do you really think you could pull it off?” Smirking, I shot back, “Well, only if you show me how.” This made her laugh out loud. I could see it was all an act.

Or was it? About 10 minutes later, she stood up during the middle of the message and shouted, “WHAT DO YOU WANT?” Apparently the kid sitting next to her was “looking at her funny” the entire time. I have no idea if it was true. He looked pretty confused as to why she was yelling at him.

Moriah seemed to be angry all the time—at everyone and at everything. Two weeks later, she threw a chair at someone and then stormed out. I followed her. Turning around, she leered, “You don’t get it, do you? My dad left us last month. No one even knows where he is. My mom just dumps me with you because she thinks it will be good for me.” Hot tears ran down her cheeks.

I was shocked that she told me how she really felt. Yet this open door gave me the chance to really talk to her. I empathized with her. I told her that no one “dumped” her on me. I was glad that she was there. Most of all it

gave me a chance to tell her for the first time what Christ thought of her and that he would never abandon her. I wish I could say that it was a Disney® Moment, when an angry and hurting kid gets every problem solved in the span of less than 30 minutes. Instead, we sat in silence for another 45 minutes.

My first step was to spend more time with this young woman. I thought a listening ear would help. Moriah still seemed to have a hair-trigger temper. With me she was funny and open; at group it felt like she trampled over the other adults and students. This was a girl who was hurting and who couldn't trust anyone.

Let's face it: The angry, defiant students in our groups are not easy to love. Sometimes they throw a fit just to see a reaction. Just when it feels like they have been truly "transformed," their lack of self-control rears its ugly head.

In these moments, I must remember not to take the anger personally. It might be directed at me but isn't for me. In Moriah's case, it was the feeling of physical and emotional abandonment by her parents. It turned

out Moriah was so angry with her dad for leaving, that her mom didn't know what to say. For other students, there might be issues at school. There might even be a psychological or biological cause to their behavior. Or the defiance could just be a natural part of adolescence that causes a fragile identity and frustration as teenagers navigate the route between childhood and the adult years.

Having a “never give up on you” attitude is essential. I must help teenagers get to know other adults at the ministry as well. The tendency will be for angry, defiant students to only trust me if they think I am the only one paying attention. I need to teach them how to communicate and interact with the world around them. It is a vital life skill.

Most importantly, I must remember that I am not looking for “behavior modification” in these students; I want a “worldview transformation.” Sure, I can talk to them about self-control. Has a student like Moriah genuinely chosen to follow Christ and lead a Jesus-centered life? If not, she won't display the Fruit of the Spirit or have the Lord to help her. She needs to understand that her

identity is in Christ and that Jesus wants her to be at peace.

Moriah and I studied this verse: *Better to be patient than powerful; better to have self-control than to conquer a city (Proverbs 16:32).*

Next Steps:

- **Set clear boundaries for your group.** Defiant students will push to see what they can get away with. Clearly communicate acceptable behavior. This keeps adults from hyper-focusing on those they think act “the worst.” Then follow through when someone breaks the rules. Do not think of these on the spot. Work with your team to have consistent consequences that are easily enforceable.
- **Offer patient, consistent, and encouraging coaching.** Praise and thank teenagers when they are participating appropriately. Remind them of proper ways to react: “We don’t need to scream every time someone makes us angry.”

- **Avoid singling out any student.** Pull defiant students aside or redirect the negative behavior—but don't reprimand in front of the whole group.
- **Don't die on every hill.** It can be easy to “hyper focus” on everything these students do. If they are not being disruptive in any way or maybe being just a tiny bit annoying, let it go. Overemphasizing every behavior may turn this into an attention-seeking situation.
- **Practice “active listening.”** This means that you truly hear what students have to say in one-on-one encounters. Make eye contact. Watch body language and facial cues. Make sure you communicate back using a student's own words. For example:

Student: “Everyone is always against me!”

You: “I hear you saying that everyone is against you. Why do you feel that's the case? How does it make you feel when this happens?”

- **Reward, don't bribe.** Bribing focuses on modifying the behavior: “If you stop screaming every week, I

will give you X.” A reward is something that’s earned. For example, only students who have exhibited self-controlled behavior are allowed on trips.

- **Does the student want it?** This requires a hard reality check. If students are not changing, do they want to? If they don’t want to change, you may have to decide if it is healthy for them and the rest of the group to continue on in that setting. Perhaps you continue to mentor a student, even if she stops coming to youth group.

CHAPTER 7:

I FOUND YA!

The Clingy Kid

I “inherited” Liz. That sounds horrible. However, when I came on as the youth director, I was told, “Liz needs a mentor.” What I didn’t know was that two other women had already worked with her in one-on-one discipleship settings. They were tired, so she was “left for me.”

A friend of mine refers to students like Liz as “I found ya” kids. Wherever you go, they are already there waiting. Liz practically became an extension of my body. At first it was fun to get to know her. I wasn’t even sure she would want me to be her spiritual mentor. But the woman “handing her off” had told me, “Don’t worry, she will love you.” What I didn’t realize was that loosely translated, this meant, “Liz will take anyone; she is needy.”

Her parents were both professionals. From a small age she and her siblings had become latchkey kids. Her parents kept telling her, “To provide for everything you need, it just has to be this way.” They worked long hours, and by the time they got home, exhaustion took over. In addition, her dad traveled quite a bit. Eventually, he was just away more than he was with the family. And when he was home physically, he was absent emotionally. Liz was a student who simply hungered for time—and at least she

wasn't looking for love in the arms of some boy or the bottom of some bottle.

Liz is a sweet girl, and it felt really good to be someone who was finally there for her. I was certain that no one had really taught her basic life coping skills, so that became my "job" as well. She desperately hung on to every word that I said. This made me feel very important and super wise. I would pick her up after school, and we would talk for hours. Was I supposed to fix every problem? Honestly, I thought she would benefit from a surrogate mom, so I would step in and be that for her as well.

The problem with "playing mom" was that Liz started to view me in that role as well. She would call, text, use Facebook®, or find other ways to track me down—at all hours of the day and night. I was totally unprepared. I didn't realize that she would want to be with me always and would get angry and bitter when I could not or would not. This made her manipulative. Liz could not see she was trying to create a codependent situation. In her mind she wanted me to crave time with her the same way she craved time with me.

But she really didn't like any of the answers I gave. Liz especially hated it when I would give any sort of "hard advice." She just wanted me to see myself as her "savior" so I would swoop in and make it better. For a while it worked; if she wasn't asking for help, I was concerned I was not doing enough. After all, my role was to be the hands and feet of Christ to her. Truthfully, I was crushed under the weight of not being able to change her life. I couldn't make her dad stay home or her mom work less.

Before I knew it, I was so focused on Liz that the rest of my youth group was suffering. Other kids wanted to spend time with me. Yet Liz would tell them that she and I were going to spend time together that day, even if it was a lie.

I knew I had to do something, or I would simply give up on this girl. Hiding and dreading her calls became my response—a horrible response. Liz started thinking I was abandoning her as well. Perhaps I should just sit down and talk to her about it? Could she understand? I needed to give it a try.

Because I had built a deep relationship with Liz, I was honest with her. I told her that I love her, but Jesus loves

her more. She had not only begun to make me a parent, I was also becoming her “god.” I asked her if we could start praying together every time we met up. She needed to see that I was not the one to answer everything, the one that could fill the longing in her heart to be wanted and loved. Only Christ could do that. It was difficult to navigate. This was a tender line between pointing her to Jesus while at the same time letting her know I was not pushing her away.

Slowly, I started making our times together more productive and less about her problems. Instead of always spending time one on one, we hung out in groups. She was actually the impetus for me starting a “Soul Sistas” group at my house once a week. This was a small group of girls (and adults) who ate dinner together while talking about how to be true women of God. This became a great time to talk to several girls about their relationships with their parents. I let them know that it was God’s desire that their parents had hearts that were “turned toward their children” and that children had hearts for their parents. We need to pray for our parents and—as weird as it may feel—tell them we want to spend time with them.

The girls, especially Liz, weren't sure about this. I didn't know how the parents would respond. However, the girls had been so honest with how they all wished they were more involved in their lives. I knew I had to stop judging parents and to help them repair their broken relationships. In this case, helping Liz see she was cherished by the Lord and knowing her parents was a good move.

Liz and I read Psalm 139 together. This helped her see how the Lord is always with her. It's a powerful passage that ends with these words in verses 23 and 24: *Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. Point out anything in me that offends you, and lead me along the path of everlasting life.*

Next Steps:

- **Establish clear boundaries.** Let all your students know times that you do not answer calls, respond to texts, or engage in social media.
- **Share the love.** Teach students how to build healthy relationships with many people. Encourage

friendships with strong peers, as well as with mentors.

- **Treat parents like parents.** Rid yourself of the “they just dump their kids” attitude. Ask God to help you see them through his eyes. Start by respecting the position they should be walking in. Remember to ask parents (all parents) permission before you spend any time with their child, every time.
- **Help parents succeed.** Have trainings for parents. Remind them that their children want them to simply “show up” in their lives. Send home easy discussion prompts that can be used during a meal once a week. Try texting parents a question to ask their children while driving in the car.
- **Remember that when we fail, Jesus won't.** Have ongoing discussions about how people will let us down, but the Lord is always with us.
- **Make a schedule.** Move away from impromptu hangout times with clingy students. Instead, when meeting one on one, make it a certain day of the

week for a set period of time (such as Fridays from 3 to 4 p.m.). End on time every time.

- **Consider coping skills.** Clingy kids may have more going on than meets the eye. A counselor may be needed to help them with some life skills. If the problems seem too big for you, don't be afraid to talk to their parents about places they can learn how to not be codependent.

CHAPTER 8:

MY HAND IS OUT; FILL IT!

The Entitled Kid

“Imagine that you have lost everything. You have no money, no food, nothing.” I was leading a lesson on understanding the source of our identity. Are we searching for our identity in our stuff or in Jesus? Teaching students from a diverse economic background, I had no idea the reactions I would receive. A hand went up immediately. “That could never happen,” Ted shot out. “Well, we are pretending for a second; just try,” I replied. “I just want you to know that I have a protected trust fund and there is no way I will even be middle class, much less poor,” Ted quipped.

It was true; Ted had never been in want a day in his life. You could say his parents catered to his every whim. “Could we, for the sake of argument and my illustration, just imagine?” I asked. “Well, I can attempt it, but you owe me,” Ted responded. “Those people would have something if they would just get a job.”

That’s when I saw another hand raised in the back of the room. This time it was Roy. I wondered if this topic hit a little too close to home. This was a kid who lived without, most of the time. He was a sneaker size behind what his shoes should be. His need was most obvious when we hit

a buffet; I had to stop him from getting more food or else he made himself sick, every time. I knew he wasn't about to announce any of this, so I truly wondered what he would say. "Maybe some of them can't get a job. Maybe it's because no one will even look at their applications," Roy responded.

This was not the direction that I wanted to take the conversation, so I redirected them back to the point: our identity.

After group, Ted told me the date of the winter retreat wasn't good for him. He asked if I could change it. After I told him no, that 50 kids had already signed up, he declared, "You say I matter, but obviously not that much." Roy, on the other hand, came up to me afterward and asked if I had five dollars. When I asked him what for, he just got mad and declared, "You say you care about me; if you did, you would just give me the money and not ask questions."

Standing there stunned, I wanted to scream at both of the boys. Why did they try to manipulate me? I wanted to say to Ted, "Are you seriously asking me this question?" and

to Roy, “You don’t need a handout, you need hope.” Both responses lacked humility. In both boys, one common attitude emerged: entitlement. Ted lives in such a bubble of safety that he doesn’t know how to see outside of it. Roy lives without a sense of security, so he has become a survivor. He scrounges and digs for whatever he can get. Either way the heart issue is, “It’s all about me.” If I do not give them what they want, then I become the proverbial bad guy.

That’s when I had to take a look at my own heart. If I am honest, in some ways I have a similar attitude: “Well, I am ministering to you, so you owe it to me to follow Christ.” I had to just remember that all of us need Jesus the same way.

Ted was actually pretty new to our group. Thinking about it, how could I expect him to understand himself in Christ? I didn’t know if he had ever honestly made a commitment to follow Jesus. He was acting like the world because he was still attached to it. His “stuff” was the center of his world, and he had never been asked to see beyond it. On the other hand, I knew that Roy was trying to follow the Lord. I had to gently remind him that what

we're "owed" is eternal separation from God. I had to show him that the Lord would indeed take care of his every need—physical, emotional, and spiritual. He had to learn to live in that.

The next week I decided to show *The Jesus Film* to my students and tell them its history. People all over the world in the poorest countries have seen this film, learned who Christ is, and chosen to follow him. (Next time I might show *The Passion of the Christ*.) I decided to start a study on who Jesus is, what he has done, and how we "owe" him everything.

I knew I couldn't change these students' hearts. However, I could show them the Lord. They were going to need to see for themselves all that they have. Seeing the world through Christ's eyes begins with the ability to see beyond ourselves.

Both Ted and Roy need to remember the truth of 1 John 2:15-16. *Do not love this world nor the things it offers you, for when you love the world, you do not have the love of the Father in you. For the world offers only a craving for physical pleasure, a craving for everything we see,*

and pride in our achievements and possessions. These are not from the Father, but are from this world.

Next Steps:

- **Give opportunities to serve.** Take students to nursing homes, organize service days, or clean the church on a Saturday. Have fundraisers with the sole purpose of giving the money to an organization or a missionary your church supports. Take your students on a mission trip, locally or internationally. Teach them to serve, just to serve.
- **Perform random acts of kindness.** On a Saturday, assign one adult to a small group of students. Brainstorm ahead of time what they will do that day. See how many random acts of kindness they can accomplish in one day—such as paying the bill of the person behind them in the drive-thru at lunch, handing out water on a hot day, feeding meters on a busy street, or baking cookies and delivering them to a neighbor's house. The main rule is that people cannot know who performed the act of kindness. Discuss at the end of the day what it was like to

serve anonymously and how this can become a lifestyle.

- **Read the autobiography of a missionary together.** Some examples would include Hudson Taylor, Mother Teresa, or Mama Maggie Gobran.
- **Give them the chance to lead.** Put students in positions of leadership with accountability. Our first step in learning to lead well is learning to think of others first. Give them some responsibility that requires putting others first.
- **Offer assistance to families.** For students like Roy who may have genuine needs, consider asking parents if they need some help. Get to know them and see how the church can support them while they are struggling.

CHAPTER 9:

PROUD TO BE A PHARISEE

The Legalistic Kid

“There’s a lot of bleeped-out words during this show; do you really think we should watch it?” A group of students had come over for a pizza-and-hangout night. The students had turned on a cooking show where chefs compete. The head chef is a famous guy known for his volatile temper and his horrific language. Travis was the first to point out that it might be a sin to watch the show at all. I told him it was an innocent “food fight.” Travis asked if he could go in the other room and put something else on. The other kids just groaned that he was “too good” for them.

Yet that’s Travis. He wants to cross every “T” and dot every “I” to be right with the Lord. No matter how many times I have emphasized the power of grace, it seems like he misses it. Instead he keeps a checklist in his head of what will make God happy. He says he understands that his salvation isn’t earned, but still he acts that way.

The hard thing is that from the outside, everything he does looks great. He has a quiet time every day without fail. He can quote Scripture more accurately than anyone I know. He is a servant and will give you the shirt off his back. His brother is the “rebellious” son, so he is doing

everything possible to be the opposite of that. He wants to get it perfect.

What this has created is a legalistic literalist. A friend gave him a T-shirt with a picture of a popular superhero on it. Travis politely thanked him and then came to me later saying, “I don’t think I can wear a picture of a pagan god on my chest. I hope my friend isn’t mad at me.” Looking at the shirt, I thought it was fine. I can’t tell you how many times Travis has asked me a version of the question, “If I do this, do you think it is a sin?”

Lately, though, the problem has been that Travis has begun to have some doubts about his relationship with Christ. He prayed to follow Jesus at a very young age. However, Travis feels like he hasn’t ever really heard from him or felt him in a tangible way. Travis came into my office the other day, slumped down, and asked, “Is Jesus *really* in my heart?” This sparked a long conversation about the truth about faith and that sometimes we simply make a choice to believe. More often than not, a hard part of understanding our deepening relationship with Christ is that it’s more of a decision than a feeling.

For Travis, it is easier to just make his list of do's and don'ts and stick to them. Then he knows what is going well and that God is watching. At the same time, he can judge those that are not "living by the rules." This has bred a sense of religion, where he has missed out totally on the relationship offered to him in the person of Christ.

I don't want to tell Travis to "go wild." There is nowhere in the Bible that tells us that rebellion is a normal phase of life. It's good that he isn't acting out. But I am working with Travis to understand that "silent" sin is still sin. When he stands in judgment of others, it is a sin. When he can't accept God's grace, it is a sin. Yet doubting is not a sin—it causes him to truly seek God. When we press in to be closer to Christ, we can get to know him.

Travis needs to get to know the true person of Christ. Jesus loves it when we live for him because we love him. This means rather than going through the motions to be closer to Christ, by getting to know him better we *want* to live for him.

I can see that it is hard for Travis. Life with his brother has been a challenge. His parents haven't known what to do,

so they just pretend like everything is fine. His brother has made life-altering choices that have hurt everyone in his path. Travis just wants to make up for it.

What I am finding is that Travis simply requires a lot of patience and understanding. Yesterday, I showed him this illustration. I took off my wedding band, held it in the palm of my hand, and asked if he could grab it. Quickly, he picked it up. “Now let’s try this again,” I stated. This time I held the ring tightly in my fist; he couldn’t get it away from me. I said, “When we belong to the Lord, no one and nothing can snatch us out of his hand. Sin can touch us, but nothing can get us out of his grasp. You see, when we belong to him, nothing we do or don’t do can take us away from him.”

Travis and I looked at Ephesians 2:8-10 together: *God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can’t take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it. For we are God’s masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago.*

Next Steps:

- **Talk about grace.** Make sure you have a continuous conversation about the truth of grace. We can never do anything to earn our way into God's favor.
- **Focus on heart issues.** Remind teenagers that we can do the right thing with the wrong heart. This is not what God wants. God wants us to live for him because we know that we love him and that he loves us. Work with them to understand their motives. This can help them see if they seeking God. Why do they want to judge? Why do they want to lead the worship band?
- **Take students with you on a service day.** Spend a day visiting a jail or helping at a soup kitchen. Then talk to your students about the experience. Help them to see that Jesus loves each person with extravagance because he simply wants a relationship with us.
- **Praise character traits.** Compliment a student like Travis on things that he is not "good at." Is he kind?

Shift the focus away from what he does, and talk about the person he is.

- **Encourage accountability.** Help these students connect with a peer or mentor who is willing to speak honestly and to confront lovingly.
- **Work on what living for Christ means.** Help them to see their strengths and their gifts. Are they willing to give their whole future to Christ? Will they let God use them fully?

CHAPTER 10:

SO WHAT IF YOU REALLY BELIEVE IN ME?

The Complacent Kid

Shawn comes and says nothing. Week after week, I can barely get him to engage. He sits on the fringe of the group, rarely talking. I would take it personally, but he won't talk to anyone—not just me. At first I thought he was shy. Then one day I saw him hanging out with his friends, and he was a totally different person, loud and confident. The next week at church I looked again, and I saw him as a student who was disinterested or at least was acting that way. I just kept telling him I was glad that he came.

One week, we played a game where teams built towers using only marshmallows and toothpicks. The team with the highest freestanding tower won. At first Shawn did his usual “sit on the sidelines with arms crossed” thing. However, his team was failing miserably, and he jumped in. His teammates were mesmerized as they tried his suggestions and they worked. Before long all the other teams gave up as they watched Shawn at work. His tower of marshmallows was higher and more solid than anyone else's.

Finally, we had broken through! Shawn's personality had emerged! Yet as soon as the game was over, it was as if he “remembered” his youth group persona, moving to the back of the room and staying silent.

I asked Shawn if he liked coming to youth group. He wouldn't look me in the eye and just shrugged his shoulders. I was starting to get exasperated. I was waiting for the kid I had seen with his friends to come to church, too. So I asked Shawn what he liked to do. After I told him that "nuthin" was not an answer, he said he liked basketball. "All right, this Saturday, you and I are hitting the courts," I told him. He let out a long sigh. "Come on, I'll make it worth it!" I bribed him with the promise of food afterward if he could beat me in two out of three games.

That night, when his mom came to get him, I pulled her aside and asked if it would be OK if I spent the day with him that weekend. "Of course," she exclaimed. Shawn's parents just thought he was lazy. They couldn't get him interested in anything either. I made sure to tell her that I thought Shawn was a born leader who just might need a little encouragement.

I was shocked that Shawn was actually up and ready when I arrived at his house. The day went really well. I didn't have to let him beat me; he was actually a really good baller. Over lunch, I asked him if he played on the school team. "Naw, I don't like the coach," he told me. I found out he used to play in middle school. What I started

to realize was that Shawn had rarely been pushed to do anything he didn't really want to do. He could easily float through life if his grades were decent and if he flew "under the radar."

Talking more, he admitted that he did go out for the high school basketball team. Apparently, the coach had told him to play harder his first day but he didn't want to—so he quit. He wasn't cut from the team; he just hadn't wanted to show the coach what he had. There was some sort of fear of failure that plagued Shawn. If he stepped out, fell down, or made anyone unhappy, then he shut down. I think Shawn was really petrified of success.

He opted to maintain the status quo, not wanting to stand out at all. This was how he protected himself. Yes, he had a small group of friends that he could be himself with, but other than that, he wasn't going to risk any sort of rejection. This made me learn an interesting technique with Shawn: I had to draw him out.

The day of basketball was only a first step. I saw that Shawn responded really well when he was comfortable. This is why quietly he needed to be challenged to be

more. He didn't even realize that he had so much to offer the world.

Together we set out to explore Shawn's strengths. There were some books we could read together that helped the process. He had never really thought about the truth that he was created for more than simply existing. We explored the idea that God has a purpose and a plan for his life and what that meant. There had to be *something* that Shawn was passionate about. I started to really press in and find those areas that made him want to give more. I helped him see he was created in the image of God for more.

Probably the simplest yet most important step I took was to start purposely engaging Shawn in our small groups. I would ask each student pointed questions like, "What do you think about that?" During these times I would ensure that they were opinion questions. It wasn't about Shawn getting the answer right or wrong; it was about getting him to tell us what he thought.

Part of learning to follow Jesus is learning what it means to belong to him. When we come to understand that we

are God's children through our relationship with Christ, then we can grow beyond our apathy.

Shawn and I studied Ephesians 1:4-8 together: *Even before he made the world, God loved us and chose us in Christ to be holy and without fault in his eyes. God decided in advance to adopt us into his own family by bringing us to himself through Jesus Christ. This is what he wanted to do, and it gave him great pleasure. So we praise God for the glorious grace he has poured out on us who belong to his dear Son. He is so rich in kindness and grace that he purchased our freedom with the blood of his Son and forgave our sins. He has showered his kindness on us, along with all wisdom and understanding.*

Next Steps:

- **Clearly communicate expectations.** Discuss when and what you want, and then ensure that you hold students to follow through on commitments.
- **Ask good questions.** Avoid asking “closed” questions. (Example: Do you like school?) Students

will respond with the shortest answer possible. (Example: “Yes” or “No.”) Instead, ask open-ended questions that require an explanation. (Example: What is the craziest thing you learned this week, and why was it so crazy?)

- **Get to know students well.** You may need to start with statements about yourself and then invite them to talk about themselves. “My favorite ice cream flavor is banana; what about you?” Small talk is a great place to start.
- **Ask them to serve and lead.** Show them they were made for more than sitting on the sidelines. Tell them what you see as their strengths, and give them opportunities to use those strengths. And keep asking and encouraging them to serve and lead; it likely will take many requests and many settings for them to respond positively.
- **Talk about the future.** Ask complacent teenagers what they want to be when they get older. Work with them to create a “Dream Board”—a poster board with pictures and words, either hand-drawn or put in

collage form, that expresses what they want for their future. Start working with them to figure out God's plans and purposes for their lives.

- **Know when students won't try.** No matter how much time we spend telling our complacent students about Christ and how they were made for more, it is up to them to decide when and if they will choose to believe it.

CHAPTER 11:

**NO MATTER
HOW I HARD I
TRY, I'M JUST
NOT COOL**

**The Socially
Awkward Kid**

Tyrone just walked in. If he were any other student, he would be applauded for sporting the latest fashion. Instead Tyrone looks uncomfortable. It doesn't look like something he would normally wear, so it just isn't him.

That pretty much sums up Tyrone; he spends a lot of time trying really hard—too hard. I wish he would simply see how amazing he is. I like to think of it as being comfortable in your own skin. Some people seem to be able to celebrate who they are, but Tyrone seems to be running away from who he is. I can tell Tyrone feels like he's on the outside looking in.

As he moves around the youth group, he attempts to talk the way that his peers are speaking. It might be sports, or a favorite song, or a TV show. However, it seems like he can't even get that right. He likes the team that is losing, the movie no one wants to watch, and the video game no one plays. My heart hurts for this guy. I can see he struggles so hard to “get it right.” I wish he knew how special he really is.

When Christmas was approaching, I decided to have a gingerbread house-making contest. I laid out the pieces of cookie, the frosting, and the bowls of candy. I told

students that whoever came up with the most creative house would win a prize. Most of the other students used it as an excuse to eat the candy or throw it at each other. Not Tyrone. I have never seen him so intent. He created the most intricate gingerbread house that I have ever seen, with shingles on the roof, and he created an intricately patterned stained-glass window—I have no idea how he did it. Watching Tyrone in his element was amazing. The other students started to take notice and gathered around him. They even began to all work together on his house. He was having fun, being himself, not trying to pretend to be anything or anyone else.

Unfortunately, Tyrone doesn't always "get" social cues. At the end of the gingerbread house project, someone complimented him. Instead of saying thanks, Tyrone got defensive. Sometimes he doesn't know how to let a subject go when everyone else has moved on. He seems to keep bringing it back around to whatever he was talking about. It's like he doesn't even notice.

Because Tyrone struggles with just being himself, it is an effort to find friends, even with other Christian teenagers. Last week in the van ride home from an event, he had a 15-minute fight with another guy about whether

some video game was good or not. He hated the game; the other kid loved it. Tyrone wouldn't drop it. He kept bringing it up and pushing his point. I ended up having to pull over the van before Tyrone got punched. When I dropped him off at the end of the night, I heard the other kid whisper, "What's wrong with Tyrone anyway?"

When I sat down with Tyrone's parents, his mom indicated that at home he is quiet and that she struggles with getting him to open up. She thinks that it is just the weight of peer pressure that causes him to act this way. Perhaps he was just a little immature for his age. His need to be a different version of who he is could be rooted in so many things.

I took the opportunity to tell Tyrone's parents what I love about their son. He always sees the others that are the "least of these" and reaches out. I've watched him often give food to the homeless and treat them with respect. He has so many qualities of Christ. What we needed was to put our heads together on creative ways for him to understand his identity in Christ.

The first step we took was to give him a place where he regularly could serve those in need. This seemed to

come naturally to him. Our local hospital was looking for people to read to cancer patients in the children's ward on Saturdays. I knew that Tyrone would have a great mix of compassion and humor to offer these kids. I wanted him to see how much he had to offer. This idea was a hit; Tyrone even started a book drive so that he could give books to the children to keep.

Tyrone and I started hanging out, and we would talk about what it means to have our identity in Christ. We read *Chazown* by Craig Groeschel together. This book deals with ways to recognize God's vision for our lives. My hope was that Tyrone would see himself through the eyes of Jesus and be happy with who he is. It has been a very slow process. I still feel that Tyrone often is trying to be something he is not. However, I do feel like I see the "real" Tyrone more and more often.

Tyrone and I read through John 1:10-12 together. This helped him to see that even Jesus was not accepted for who he is. Yet when our identity is in Christ, it gives us tremendous life: *He came into the very world he created, but the world didn't recognize him. He came to his own people, and even they rejected him. But to all*

who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God.

Next Steps:

- **Pursue the “real” identities.** Get to know who they are. What are their real hobbies, their likes, and their dislikes? Engage them in these areas.
- **Create a safe place.** Many times, socially awkward kids’ behavior can be the result of bullies or behind-the-back snickers from peers. As you already have rules banning mean talk, make sure you are diligent to not allow it to happen during youth group.
- **Study Revelation 2:17 with them.** Let them know that the labels or “names” the world gives us are nothing in light of what God thinks of us.
- **Speak words of life.** Tell them what you love about them, and help these students to see those character qualities that you admire. Remind them that they don’t have to be anyone else. Focus on the heart. Are they loyal? compassionate? a good

friend? Keep letting them know that these are what are important.

- **Spend time in groups for fun nights.** Create times when other kids can get to know these students in a setting that is just fun, with no pressure.
- **Have a team-building night.** Try playing games where everyone in the group learns to work as a team. That way, everyone can begin to see the strengths that others hold (jubed.com and youthministry.com have some great ideas).
- **Create an encouragement night.** Spend time in an evening setting where students give each other compliments or write encouraging notes to each other.

CHAPTER 12:

I'M DYING INSIDE

The Hurting Kid

It's a pool party in the middle of July. Audrey showed up wearing long sleeves and jeans. I used to think all of the baggy clothes were part of her style. Yet today it was close to 90 degrees out, and I was sweating just looking at what she was wearing.

Offering to let her borrow a bathing suit, I told her that she would more comfortable in the water. Audrey just smiled and told me she was fine. This was more than some teen girl body issues. I had seen this behavior before, and I wondered if it reflected some deeper issues.

This has been a hard year for Audrey. Her family had gone through a messy divorce. It was her mom's second marriage, to a guy who had been a deacon at their church. What no one knew was that he was addicted to porn and had been molesting Audrey for a year. She had finally been brave enough to tell her mom. They confronted him together. The police were called. But he was soon released for lack of evidence and simply moved away.

Audrey and her mom just couldn't stay at that church, and she wound up in my youth group. Audrey was hurt and bitter and angry. Thanks to some good friends,

she was in counseling. She had threatened suicide but had come to a healthier place in her life. I suspected, however, that she was cutting herself.

I asked Audrey if she could stay until the end of the party so we could have some extra time together, and I told her I could give her a ride home. I felt so unqualified to handle this. There were people out there with college degrees who were better equipped. There were books I had read about teenagers like Audrey and how to help them, but now I couldn't remember a single word. How could I tell her that everything was going to be OK and not have it sound hollow? How could I point her to Jesus without her thinking I was just offering trite platitudes?

On the drive home, I asked if she would like to tell me about wearing a winter outfit in the middle of summer. Pulling up her sleeves to show me, she revealed scars as well as some fresh cuts on her forearms. "Does your mom know?" I inquired. Audrey admitted that her mom suspected, but Audrey had lied and said it wasn't true. "I just keep messing up, and I don't know how to be better." She hung her head and started to sob. "Does your counselor know?" I asked. "No, I told my mom she wasn't helping so I wasn't going back there," she said.

I started by telling Audrey what I always seem to lead with: how much I loved her and that God loves her more. “None of this is your fault,” I told her. She had to stop blaming herself for the divorce and for the abuse. “Sometimes I just sit around ticked off,” she responded. “Why did this have to happen to me? Why did my mom marry that guy? Then other times I just feel guilty. I keep trying to figure out what I could have done to stop it.”

I knew that these were big questions. They were the reason why she was cutting. Audrey went on: “I try so hard to just feel better. I even try to pray. I don’t think God hears me. I think he has forgotten me.” This broke my heart; God was the only one who could help.

All I knew to do was to talk about the love of Christ and how we live in a fallen world with fallen people. *No one is righteous—not even one (Romans 3:10)*—that means we all sin. What is unfair is when it wasn’t our choice. Yet we have to choose to believe that God hasn’t stopped loving us. God cries with us. *The Lord is close to the brokenhearted; he rescues those whose spirits are crushed (Psalm 34:18)*. Ultimately, we can’t live without hope. It is a process to understand that this hope has to be found in Jesus.

Then I told her she needed to tell her mom about the cutting and to go back to counseling. Neither idea thrilled her. Did she want me to come with her to tell her mom? She said yes and asked if I would just come into the house right now. I had decided that if she had said no, I would give her a short time frame to tell her mom, and then I would do it myself because her mom needed to know.

The conversation with her mom went great. I let them both know that I was in this with them for the long haul, yet I felt Audrey needed counseling as well. Mom agreed. Audrey reluctantly agreed to give it another go, if they could find a different counselor. I let her know just that this would help her with the coping skills she needed to move forward.

I had been that hurting teenager as well. In talking with Audrey, I had to make sure that I didn't respond from my own past hurts. What I could offer was how the Lord had healed my own wounds. For Audrey and our other "hurting kids," there is nothing to say that will immediately make things better. Instead, we must constantly and consistently tell them what they mean to Christ.

Audrey and I spent time understanding Romans 8:31-39. We took the time to go through it line by line, starting with these words in verse 31: *What shall we say about such wonderful things as these? If God is for us, who can ever be against us?* What could it mean that God is for her when life gets so low? What does it mean that nothing can take her from God's love?

Next Steps:

- **Start a study with your group.** Consider using the *Life Hurts God Heals* curriculum, which is written specifically for these students.
- **Don't try to have all the answers.** Know that it is OK to say, "I don't know why," and just be there.
- **Avoid "savior syndrome."** You can't always make it better. Only Christ can save, bring hope, or change a heart. Point hurting students toward Jesus. Know when to invite other members of the body of Christ in for support.
- **Work with the parents.** Just let them know that you are there for them as a family.

- **Stay involved.** Even when students go into counseling, they will often need us to be around just to love them. You are not off the hook; remain a part of their lives.
- **Eat the “elephant” one bite at a time.** Don’t try to tackle every issue at once. Discuss one problem at a time.
- **Ask for help.** Do some research about professional counselors in your area. Know when the problem is too big for you. At the same time, you may benefit from reading a book like *Hurt: Inside the World of Today’s Teenagers* by Chap Clark or articles on these topics to understand what is going on.

CHAPTER 13:

MOVING OUT FROM UNDER THE GREEN SKY

It has taken a lifetime to “undo” the titles I wore as a teenager. I never really thought people liked me so much as they just endured me. However, age brings perspective. Standing back I can now see that God knit me together uniquely—on purpose for a purpose.

In the end, our teenagers often live in a world where they have not had someone who would take a chance on them. They have been living in a world where all they can see is the lie. I call this a “green sky.” The sky can be many, many colors. It can be blue, gray, black, purple, or even orange. It can be filled with white fluffy clouds. It can never be green. As a matter of fact, on that extremely rare occasion when it appears green before a severe storm, it is really an off-shade of blue. When you live in this world long enough, the hope is sucked from you. My favorite verse for combating this is Proverbs 13:12—*Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a dream fulfilled is a tree of life.*

Our role as youth workers is to help teenagers move into a world where the sky is blue—not a world of perfection, but a world where someone sees them with Christ’s eyes. This is the place where dreams are fulfilled. The true sky is always blue.

The world will slander our students. The deceiver will tell them forever that they are nothing. It may take a voice that simply and quietly reminds them of Jesus. The greatest role we can fulfill with these students is time—time to love them, time spent with them, time to understand them. I would argue that we must be people who never give up on them. Yes, they might walk away, but in our souls we keep believing and praying that one day it will make sense. Like the father of the prodigal son, we will sit on the porch waiting for their return home. Then one day we will go running out to meet them.

My passion for these kids remains strong. Through all of my teenage years, I just wanted someone to stop telling me my failures. God spoke words of life and set me free. I am meeting more and more of these kids. It feels like more are aching than ever before. In 20 years of ministry, it hasn't gotten easier. It is because it isn't about "making anyone better." I think of these words by Mike Yaconelli: "Spirituality is not about being fixed; it is about God's being present in the mess of our unfixeness."

Yet I feel like I can look at it one of two ways. I can try to make their lives more comfortable for today and then hope they muddle through. My other option is to believe

that God will do his work in their lives. I can stop seeing with my physical eyes and gaze upon a work in progress. My choice every day becomes to have faith. *Faith is the confidence that what we hope for will actually happen; it gives us assurance about things we cannot see (Hebrews 11:1).* I can't see yet who they will be, but I choose to believe it's coming. Every day.

When I was 23, I entered urban youth ministry. A mentor said to me, "Your broken heart gives you the ability to see these kids as they really are." That was the first time I was glad that I had been "that kid." I just keep thinking they deserve that blue sky today. I just keep dreaming of a generation that will be so in love with Jesus, it will put the rest of us to shame. These are "those kids." Let us remain faithful in our commitment to leaving no teenager behind.

