

Conversation Starters

Informal, Last Minute, Off the Cuff Chats with Youth!

“Conversation about the weather is the last refuge of the unimaginative.” -Oscar Wilde

Legitimate fears of “will I relate” or “will they talk back to me” will scurry through your head as you stare back at the expectant faces before you. Or, as you prepare the conversation on whatever the topic may be, you find that you need away to “break the ice.” Below are a few suggestions for leaders in any youth ministry setting.

1. Prepare if you can. There is nothing more noticeable than a leader who is unprepared or not ready for follow-up conversations that might arise.
2. Awkward silences can be a good thing. In a world that tells you faster is better, a moment to ponder can be comforting. There will most likely be a moment or two of silence. Don't let that intimidate you. Don't panic. It's normal.
3. Don't just jump right into the deep stuff. Let them get to know each other or catch up, then pick your time to bring up the topic for the day. Sometimes the “topic” is just getting to know each other!
4. Don't be afraid to ask a tough question. You will be surprised at how deep the youth are willing to go if you challenge them.
5. Use open-ended questions. Try to refrain from asking questions that have a yes or no, or short one-word answers. In order to foster a conversation, there has to be some actual conversing going on. If you do ask a question and get a one-word answer, ask an immediate follow up, “how” or “why do you think that” question.
6. Set expectations. Consider creating a group covenant that outlines what the expectations are of the group. This is a collaborative process that draws from everyone's idea of what makes a good group. Have everyone sign the covenant and hang it on the wall to serve as a reminder of the group's expectations.

Ideas for Conversation Starters

When starting a conversation with a group of youth, it can be hard to begin by introducing a topic cold turkey (especially if the group does not know each other very well).

Highs/Lows

Highs are the best things that have happened to them that they are willing to share. Lows are the not-so-great things that have happened to them that they are willing to share. The use of highs/lows is a great way to begin or end a conversation with the youth. It gives everyone a turn to talk about something they know, and it helps them to not be intimidated about sharing. Highs/Lows also help the leader gain insight to who the youth are, what is important to them, and in what they are involved. Highs/Lows are great for a weekly youth group meeting/small group meeting. **You might want to set some boundaries on what they share. Many times (esp. with middle schoolboys) highs/lows consist of the results of their favorite sporting team. There are other frameworks—similar to High/Low: Ups and Downs, Marathon/Finish Line and Base Camp/Mountain Top.*

God Sightings

God sightings, like highs/lows, give youth a chance to talk about their personal experience. God sightings are those moments when you indisputably know that God is reaching out to you with a message, a gesture, some instruction, or reassurance. By sharing our God sightings, youth are given a time to talk about where they saw God that day in their daily walk. At first, the youth might need some prompting to understand a God sighting. Feel free to share where you saw God at work and then encourage the youth to do likewise. God sightings work great as an open to a devotion while on a youth trip. Tell the youth at the beginning of the trip to be on the lookout for God sightings which you will share at the end of each day. This is a way to get the youth talking and sharing their experiences from the trip.

Circle Questions

Circle questions is an easy group building activity used to introduce the group members to each other in a one-on-one conversation. To begin, have everyone find a partner and stand facing each other. Then have everyone form a circle with their partners, creating an inner circle and an outer circle. They should still be facing their original partner. (If there is an odd number, you can partner up with someone to make the group even). From here, have the partners introduce themselves, then ask simple “getting to know you” questions, such as, “What is your favorite place to visit?” or “Do you have/want pets?” Everyone shares with their partner. After the sharing is finished, tell one of the circles, outer or inner, to move _____ people to the right or left. For example, “Outer circle move 3 people to your right.” Everyone should have a new partner. Again, ask a “getting to know you” question. Repeat this for 5–7 questions. Circle questions are great for new groups who do not know each other very well. They are also great for introducing a new topic and letting the youth ease into the subject. You can use the list of questions in the “Off the Cuff” section below for the circle question exercise.

Off the Cuff Questions

Sometimes we are surprised with extra time or extenuating circumstances that bring the need to have impromptu conversations. This can be intimidating to even the most prepared leader. Here is a list of questions that you can keep handy or throw on a bulletin board to discuss with the group, should the need arise.

1. What are you involved in at your school?
2. What is your absolute favorite thing to do?
3. If you could have free tickets to any concert, who would it be?
4. Who is your favorite teacher at school and what do you like about him/her?
5. Are you the type who gets things done early or waits till the last minute?
6. What do you normally do in your free time?
7. What is your favorite meal/place to eat?
8. What is your most embarrassing moment?
9. When was a time that you felt most proud of yourself?
10. Do you prefer morning or night?
11. What was the last movie you saw? Any good?
12. If you could play any sport and be great, what would it be?
13. Where is the coolest place you have ever been?
14. If you could travel anywhere in the world, where would you go?
15. What is one thing that you love about yourself?
16. What's a character quality you admire most in others?

17. If you found \$100, how would you spend it?
18. If you won the lottery, what would be the first thing you would do?
19. What is your biggest pet peeve?
20. How long have you been attending church? What brought you here?
21. What do you like/dislike about church?
22. When/where was your best worship experience? What made it so special?
23. What was your weirdest dream?
24. If you could invent one thing, what would it be?
25. Describe the most beautiful thing you have ever seen?
26. If you could trade places with anyone in the world who would it be and why? How about someone in your family?
27. Tell the group the most attractive thing about the person on your right.
28. What is your perfect iPod playlist?
29. Five things I could do to make this community better are . . .
30. The kindest thing anyone has ever done for me was . . .
31. In ten years, I want to be . . .
32. What has been your biggest struggle in school?
33. One thing I love about my parents is . . .
34. One thing I struggle with my parents about is . . .
35. What's the attitude towards Christianity in your family?

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