

Abilities by Age (Youth / Teens) – 12-18 Years Old

Teens are on the exciting (and sometimes challenging) journey from childhood into adulthood. It is during this important period of time that they begin to “break away” from their parents and become individually functioning adults. (Sometimes this goes smoothly, and sometimes it does not.) But as one of the important persons in their lives during this period, YOU as their Sunday School teacher must know as much as possible about what they are going through during this stage of their life, so that you can interact with them in more helpful and meaningful ways.

Here are some of the important things going on in their lives during this time period...

- Learning that “I am a person, who is becoming an independent adult in society.”
 - Usually they are terrified
 - They are wondering if they will be accepted by their peers (friends)
 - They are wondering if they will be alright on their own one day
 - More than anything they want to be accepted and loved, no matter what
- Physical Growth and Development now includes moving toward sexual maturity
 - This throws in a whole host of new feelings, which may be confusing
- Time when they make their faith their own (or possibly abandon it altogether)
 - Not their parents’ faith, or their teachers’ faith, but their own faith
 - They have questions/ doubts
 - Occasionally their doubts are quite disturbing to them (or to their parents)
 - If so... Stay calm. Encourage questions.
 - Rejoice with them that they are going through this process.
 - (Even though it is difficult!)
 - Reassure them that you are certain they will find their answers
 - (Because God is there, and He is very, very faithful)
 - Be supportive of the child during this process
- Application of Bible Truths
 - This age group asks (like Pontius Pilate asked Jesus) “What is truth?”
 - They want to know if they can believe the things you are teaching them
 - They want to know if they can trust what the Bible says is true
 - Whether or not they say any of this out loud, they are still thinking it
 - They want to know that God really cares about them as an individual
- Teenage Characteristics
 - May consider themselves indestructible; but actually they can be quite fragile
 - May consider themselves (or their friends) to be right all of the time
 - They are “*often wrong, but never in doubt.*”
 - They engage in thoughtful discussions of moral issues, philosophical issues
 - They want to understand why people say one thing, but do another
 - Often frustrated by this sort of behavior in friends, relatives, society

- Questions teens need the answers to:
 - How do I relate to God?
 - What does that mean to my life?
 - How am I supposed to live my life?
 - If God's going to judge me, how do I want to live?
 - What gets me saved? (Only what Jesus did for me.)
 - Our behavior (even our good behavior) is NOT what saves us.
 - Why be good? (Jesus said, *"If you love me, you will obey my commands."*)
- Things Teens need to learn to do
 - Read the Bible themselves, especially to find out truths
 - Read the Bible a LOT as a class or small group
 - My absolute favorite quote about bringing your Bible to class, is from my friend, Mr. Calvin R., an award-winning teacher, who once told a group of students:
 - *"I want you to have your Bible with you every time you come to class. Because if you have it with you, then it's more likely to fall open. And if it falls open, then we are more likely to read something out of it. And if we read something out of it, then we might just learn something."*
- Spiritual Truths they Need to Hear
 - Teens are able to learn and understand profound truths from the Word of God
 - They have a keen sense of right and wrong, and desire justice
 - They are very idealistic, and are often disturbed when things don't work out right
 - They need to learn that God can be trusted at His Word
 - That He loves them and cares for them
 - That He has a plan for their lives
 - That they can trust Him to always be there for them, no matter what
 - That God's way is the best way

As difficult as this age can be, it is a VERY important age, because if teens don't figure out these things (how they fit into the world and relate to God) at this age, then they risk carrying all of their confusion and insecurities into adulthood; and risk becoming poorly functioning adults.

Therefore, it is crucial that you **WORK HARD** with teens, to help them through this tough time.

Other Ideas for Working with Youth (Teens)

Here are some hints from my good friend, Lynn M. a wonderful teacher of 12-14 year olds:

- Consider separating boys and girls into different small groups during discussion times
 - But, *“only if you want them to talk or to learn anything.”*
 - Lynn’s reasoning for recommending small groups: People of this age *“often find members of the opposite sex so distracting that you can’t get them to talk about anything important, if they are together in mixed groups.”*
- Provide a nice, safe, place where they can burn off some of their excess energy
 - Lots of FUN games
 - Encourage activities outside
 - Organize service projects that get them working together
- Or basically, as Lynn says about this time of life: *“Just help them get through it.”*

Other ideas that will help:

- Plan Activities where you demonstrate normal social behaviors and good manners
 - Involve a few, fun, older folks (they will serve as mentors and examples)
 - Dinners (where they dress up and serve people, or provide entertainment)
 - Dances – (square dances, if nothing else)
 - Teach manners at dance
 - Movie Night
 - Show an old favorite movie on a wall or big screen
 - Remember to “sell” popcorn and soft drinks
 - Outings to various places/ camps/ etc
 - Lots of chaperones (1 adult for every 4-5 teens)
 - Spread the chaperones out among teens (don’t hide in kitchen together)
 - Campfires – can have some fun, and also have some serious talks
- Plan Service Projects
 - Often teens/ youth don’t realize their built-in desire to help others
 - Responsibility and Service to Others help teens transition into their roles as adults
 - Very often churches miss opportunities to help teens understand that they are a vibrant, important part of the church body. Service helps the teens to learn this.
 - Plan Regular Group Events to help others
 - Make cookies or other baked goods
 - Visit the elderly
 - Help a widow with house or yard work
 - Make blankets to give away
 - Pair teens with younger children in other classes at church
 - Have teens read to children, play games, encourage and mentor them
 - This is good for the teens AND encouraging for the younger children
 - Helps build fellowship within the church body

- Involve the teens in planning the service projects
 - Talk about opportunities
 - Say things like: We want to help people. We need some people to help. Who do we know who needs some help? What kind of help do they need?
- Small Groups
 - Use to discuss how we apply Bible truths to our lives
 - One leader (mature Christian) who is older than group by at least 4 years
 - One or more assistants (Christians) who are older than group by at least 2 years
 - Women leaders with girls and Men leaders with boys
 - 5-7 students in a group. (Combine groups if not enough students present)
 - Teach, ask questions, confront gently, help students find answers to questions
 - Small groups must be a “safe place”
 - No teasing
 - Listen politely while others are talking
 - No repeating stories told to the group in confidence
 - Have a really “great” name for your group (and some sort of “gimmick”)
 - The importance of this cannot be overstated – especially with boys
 - EXAMPLE: *Our son, David, had a small group at camp that they called the “Ninjas.” The first day, he taught them how to cover their faces, Ninja style, with a t-shirt. All week at camp whenever he yelled “Ninjas,” they responded “Hi!” And then they would try and become **invisible** by hiding behind something! The kids had a great time, and I’m sure their parents were horrified when they heard about it all later on... (Making the whole experience just that much greater!!)*
 - Have fun!
 - Talk about serious stuff
 - Your goal is to discuss how to apply biblical truths to your own lives

Suggested Schedule for Middle School/ High School Classes

- Welcome
- Prayer
- “Business” and Announcements (if any)
- Lesson (presented to entire group)
- Small Group time
 - Discuss lesson and how it applies to us
 - Talk about other “important things” that the kids need to talk about
 - Challenge the kids to decide for themselves if God is right in what He says
 - Pray together for small group and for friends and other needs
- Come back together with large group for praise, snacks, and dismissal