

STIRRING IT UP

by Heather Flies



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Junior High Structure—NOT an Oxymoron

“You work with junior highs?”
“Yes, I do!”
“Oh, God bless you...”

As much as I love junior high students, I understand what drives this sympathy. Look around any mall, skate park, or movie theater after a Friday night early show and there they are: packs of young teenagers who seem completely disrespectful, unruly, self-centered, and oblivious to the rest of civilization. But in my 14 years of youth ministry, I've come to see that consistent expectations and behavioral boundaries can bring out the best behavior in even the wildest junior higher.

programmatic, and emotional benefits.

Students are challenged to consider time management and assess their bladder needs (a lifelong skill, by the way!) before they enter the meeting room. No one is distracted by doors slamming or kids crawling across each other to get out of their seats during the teaching time. Keeping everyone quiet as we cover details like cabin assignments lets us get to the fun stuff sooner.

When we limit shower hours, the emphasis of summer camp is directed

Fans of Structure

You might expect my students to resist these efforts at creating structure. But I find even my 7th graders adjust well to the structure and quickly grow to appreciate it. Last year, one of my veteran 9th graders came to me, grabbing both of my arms. “Heather!” she shouted. “I almost died without you this weekend!” I have a great relationship with Kelsey, but even coming from her this seemed like a dramatic statement.

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According to the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, I am an ESFP—which means people of my personality type have the tendency to be vivacious and spontaneous. In the ministry setting I lead, however, I swear by structure, order, and a clear set of rules for every event. When the doors of the youth room close at 7:00 p.m. on a Wednesday night, no one is permitted to leave (with the exception of the girl in desperate need of a tampon!).

At retreats, cabin assignments are read with the understanding that if anyone talks during the reading, the leader will start again from the beginning. During summer camp, students aren't allowed in the showers more than one hour before breakfast. My volunteers move through the food or snack line only after the students have gone.

And the mother of them all: no pranks. No, that's not a misprint. We're clear that there are no pranks on any retreat, mission trip, or camp.

Structure and Focus

Before you think I'm a complete control freak, understand I'm a major advocate of fun and craziness. But I'm convinced that fun and structure can coexist in junior high ministry. I find the rules our students live by allow for all kinds of disciplinary,

toward friendships instead of physical appearance. And while pranks seem like a great way for kids to connect, I find they quickly turn kids' focus away from the real purpose of the retreat and on to getting back at the cabin that took their sleeping bags.

Consider the Alternative

If we ever question the effectiveness of these rules, we're often reminded of what youth ministry looks like without them. Our church once hosted an overnight leadership retreat for junior high students. Speakers, worship, and get-to-know-you games led us to the pizza party and lights out. As my staff and I stood behind the pizza counter, we were shocked to see other adult leaders pushing kids out of the way in order to get to the pizza first.

When we all headed down for lights out, kids were running all over the building as their leaders slept with earplugs (before the lights were out!). In the morning, although other instruction had been given, girls from other groups were tripping over sleeping bodies as they hauled their bags to the bathroom two hours before breakfast was served. It was not only annoying, but disruptive to others and to the purpose of the leadership retreat.

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

She told me she'd attended a Christian concert with another local church. “Kids were running all over the place, nobody was listening to the leaders, and I had no idea what we were supposed to be doing! And in the middle of it all, I thought, ‘I wish Heather was here!’”

Fans of our structure extend beyond age 15—our parents find assurance in the guidelines and know their kids are learning how to handle themselves in group settings. Another big plus is that our volunteer staff retention is way above the ministry average. Crowd control indeed falls within their job descriptions, but it's only a small part of what they spend their time doing. The rules and expectations allow these volunteers to spend more time having positive interactions with the kids. They see our system paying off again and again.

What it boils down to is this: I believe kids respond to whatever behavioral standard is set for them. We do our kids—and our ministries—a great disservice when our only requirements are that they don't destroy anything and we send them home alive. They (and we) are capable of so much more! 