

Section Three: Building Teen Ministry Programs

Part 2: Creating a Uniteen Program

Group Building

Are group dynamics important in Uniteens?

You are facilitating a group process. Everything you do is affected by, and a result of group dynamics. Some leaders are so focused on presenting lessons, they are unaware of the profound impact of group dynamics on a Uniteen's experience.

For example, Uniteens do not experience Sunday lessons in a vacuum. With adults and other teens around them, students' thoughts may be everywhere except on your lesson material. You can do all the teaching you want, but students will not participate in an activity, or come back, if they:

- Are self-conscious about how others are perceiving them
- Feel isolated or not part of the group
- Are distracted by others around them
- Have a personal conflict with someone in the group
- Don't know or trust the adults leading the class
- Are unfamiliar with, or confused by, what will happen during the class hour
- Are afraid of appearing foolish or uncool

Why is Uniteens a group process?

Uniteens is a move from a Sunday school class to a youth group, which reflects adolescents' development of group identity. As preteens and teens move through school, they begin to perceive and establish group identities. They see themselves and others as being members of:

- A circle of friends
- A sports team
- A clique
- An organization
- The 6th, 7th or 8th grade
- A gang

Social affiliations become more important and more defined. An eagerness to belong is accompanied by, or a result of, judgments about what groups people belong to. Small groups will develop even within your Uniteen program. (As adults, we do the same thing. But our concept of 'group' expands to understand what it means to be a member of a greater congregation and community.)

Whether you structure Uniteens as a youth group or as a Sunday school class, you should incorporate basic elements of the group-building and trust-building processes into your program. For your Uniteens to create a supportive spiritual community, they will need to:

- Establish a large-group relationship, not just small-group bonding within it
- Discover what conduct is expected of group members and their responsibilities to each other and creating agreements that reflect it

Steps to Building Community

The building of bonds is a natural process for people. The facilitator's role is to expedite that process. Your Uniteens and adults will bond as they spend time with each other—sharing experiences, opening up, gaining insights and developing trust. Group-building does not shortcut that process, but directly facilitates it.

Group-building activities bring members closer by:

- Increasing awareness of being 'in group'
- Helping teens and adults learn more about each other's lives
- Identifying and addressing issues that may be a source of tension
- Allowing everyone to risk a little more each time and take small steps forward together

While the group-building process is really a fluid mixture of overlapping experiences, it helps to break them down into specific components for descriptive purposes.

Group-Building Components

- Creating awareness of being in group
- Getting to know each other better

We create those components by doing the following:

- Ice Breakers
- Group agreements
- Mixers
- Cooperative exercises
- Name Games
- Trust activities
- History Sharing
- Affirming
- Stretching

(See [Section Eleven: Resources](#) for ideas and examples)

Factors That Affect the Group-Building Process

Group-building is a dynamic process, which may be helped or hindered by certain situations. Generally, an individual's journey into teen ministry follows these steps:

- Deciding to attend a Uniteen or YOU class or event
- Meeting other people there
- Being exposed to what happens in class
- Learning people's names and more about them
- Sharing experiences and beginning to trust
- Sharing deeper of their own personal history
- Understanding group agreements

As teens come together as a group, the process will be affected by five “potentially divisive-creating dynamics” (as identified in *Building Community in Youth Groups*):

- **Leadership:** There are always teens who lead by modeling and influencing. Their maturity and level of commitment to the group will determine where they lead those who choose to be followers. And there will also be some rebels, not willing to follow anyone anywhere.
- **Motivation:** Teens come for many reasons not related to church—friends, fun activities, parents' wishes, etc. Their motivations will influence their experience.
- **Desire & Ability:** Members are at different points in their spiritual yearning and understanding. And they're also at different levels in articulating and being open to sharing their thoughts and feelings. Some teens will monopolize a discussion, while others won't say a word.
- **Emotional condition:** You can't see the emotional scars, hurts, insecurities or fears that each person brings into the classroom. But they affect the group.
- **Energy differences:** You are dealing with a broad array of learning styles and energy levels. Some teens can have deep conversations, while others can't sit still.

Behavior Management Strategies

As group facilitator, you will be modeling and evaluating behavior, and responding to challenges as they arise. You must be mentally and emotionally prepared to face unexpected situations or undesired behaviors. With options as varied as the range of human expression, there is no perfect answer to addressing challenging behavior.

The purpose of this chapter is to help us understand how, as Uniteen leaders, we can:

- Determine what behavior is appropriate in the classroom
- Actively encourage positive self-expression and preempt challenges, evaluate and create logical consequences for misbehavior.

What is discipline?

- Discipline is the art of bringing an understanding of what is appropriate behavior into another's awareness.
- Unity makes no judgment about an individual's choice of self-expression. Yet as a group, teens need to decide what behavior is appropriate within the group setting.
- Creation of Group or Heart Agreements is a critical component of forming a group. Members must decide what behaviors will support them in exploring and living Truth principles at this point in their lives. And they must periodically revisit and recommit to agreements. (See Appendix for more information.)
- It is not a question of whether a teen is acting the way the leader wants or expects. Rather, it is whether he or she acts in a manner acceptable to the group given the purpose of that activity.

Recurring Themes of Discipline

- All adolescents seek acceptance, belonging and success. Most classroom behavior is related to the youth's desire to be accepted, gain a feeling of belonging and achieve success. When appropriate avenues towards such ends are closed off, youth find other ways to reach those goals which usually mean discipline problems. Attention is attention whether negative or positive.
- All adolescents can behave acceptably. Behavior is a matter of choice and they make their own decisions. You cannot control another person's decisions, but you can recognize that adolescents choose to behave the way they do because of rewards they hope to receive from others or themselves.
- Behavior is communication. What is the youth attempting to communicate? Ask questions to assist them to express their need with language.
- Discipline helps bring success. Adolescents want defined boundaries. Few teens can achieve success in classrooms which are disrupted by a lack of, or poor discipline. Discipline which educates a youth about inappropriate behavior and demonstrates the leader's commitment to maintaining a safe environment is a positive force in supporting their development.
- The leader is the most important figure in establishing class discipline. The leader will have more success by involving youth in establishing agreements for behavior, and helping them to take responsibility for their own classroom. The youth will still look to the leader (the adult presence) as the authority to handle misbehavior. That doesn't mean the leader is the only one responsible for discipline. Parents, Youth and Family Ministry Directors and ministers must also support and expect appropriate behavior.
- Discipline requires consistency and follow-up. Fairness requires wisdom and consistency. Each situation should be evaluated on its own merits, but violations of class agreements should never be ignored. This is distinctly different from ignoring attention-seeking behavior

that is not breaking an agreement. In addition, a leader should not let friendship infringe on one's responsibility to the group.

- Students who choose to break agreements must accept the consequences that accompany the rules. Rules are worth nothing if they're not enforced. Those who knowingly choose to break agreements have also chosen to accept the consequences. Consequences are not arbitrary punishments. They are results that students choose, just as they choose their behavior. Leaders must explain in detail the consequences and linkage to the broken agreements.
- Correction of misbehavior should redirect the youth. Adolescents do not always know how to behave appropriately. They may need to be shown proper behavior, be reminded of it and be positively reinforced when they do what is appropriate to the environment.
- The best way to teach good behavior is through example. Students imitate leaders. Leaders must hold themselves to the class agreements (don't expect teens to let a double-standard slip by unnoticed) and provide the best examples through their own behavior. This is why it is important to share Heart Agreements with ministers, Youth and Family Ministry Directors and parents. Have an established plan for behavior issues. Include parent, Uniteen and minister or Youth and Family Ministry Director in group discussion about behavior and responsibility.

Classroom management begins before class starts. The best way for a leader to address a behavioral challenge is by preventing it. A Uniteen leader's ability to influence behavior is not confined to class time. Things you do outside the classroom will help you deal more successfully with possible challenges inside it:

- Do your prayer and meditation work
- Have an inner conviction about the Christ presence within each teen and adult
- If facilitating the group, be prepared with lesson content and materials
- If teens are facilitating, be available as a support, giving them positive feedback and encouragement
- Plan routines and transitions
- Have Group Agreements
- Have clear boundaries for acceptable and unacceptable behavior
- Have knowledge about what is appropriate behavior for adolescents
- Learn about your individual students and their lives, so you have an understanding of where they are coming from, their challenges, interests, feelings and values
- Have a few good techniques and strategies for redirecting out-of-bounds energy
- Know when to implement Active Learning
- Use clear age-appropriate communication skills
- Line up outside help beforehand

Addressing Behavioral Challenges

Despite our best efforts to create a positive, supportive environment, disruptions and conflicts will invariably come up.

- All participants bear responsibility for maintaining group agreements. Yet, not all limit themselves to kind, loving words and actions. Words are said, the energy is disrupted, feelings are hurt, and frustrations rise.
- When boundaries are tested, teens will look to you as the adult to enforce boundaries. You should follow the basic framework listed below.

NOTE: The time required for this process can vary from the moment it takes to respond immediately with a quick word or look, to the time needed to sit down and mediate a dispute.

Gather as much information as possible.

WHO: There is more than one side to every situation. Find out who is involved—directly or indirectly—and ask each for their perspective.

WHAT & WHERE: Try to gain some clarity about what has actually happened.

WHEN: Evaluate the time frame of the situation—such as when it started, and how long it has been going on.

WHY: There is always a reason for our behavior. Find out what that is.

Determine the seriousness of the situation.

Is there a possibility of physical or emotional harm to anyone? Does it require immediate attention?

Does the situation require your intervention or presence? Will it work itself out?

Is the misbehavior temporary, a one-time occurrence due to certain circumstances, or ongoing?

Evaluate information. Decide how to proceed.

Decide if the situation warrants a response from you. If so, determine what further steps you need to take.

You may not have all the relevant information when you make a decision. Be open to adjusting your course of action as you receive new information.

Follow up with those involved.

Create Consequences to Redirect Behavior.

Effective discipline should bring an immediate awareness into group members' consciousness of a behavior's effect.

The Law of Cause and Effect states that, for every action, thought or word, there is a corresponding reaction. Behavior, whether desired or not, thus naturally generates its own consequences. For a leader or facilitator, the trick is to ensure that those consequences redirect misbehavior in a positive manner.

By using logical consequences, the teen can experience results with a direct relationship to the misbehavior. And unlike punishment, the consequences are not arbitrary, nor do they embarrass, humiliate, condemn or hurt anyone.

Options for Handling Misbehavior (adapted from Kids Can Cooperate)

Ignore Undesirable Behavior (unless there is a breaking of the Group Agreements)

- Ignoring is most effective when you ignore the offending behavior and give attention to desirable behaviors. Ignoring is appropriate when teens are fighting for attention, and the behavior is not physically or emotionally harmful to anyone else.

Restructure the Environment

- Look for ways conflict can be reduced by removing things, adding things or changing the way things are arranged. For example, if teens are fighting over food brought into the classroom, change the way it is brought in or remove it. Or if seating arrangements are causing disruptions, alter the way seats are arranged or chosen.

Encourage Problem-Solving

- Help Uniteens solve their own problems by asking them to identify the problem, generate alternatives, predict consequences and make a decision.

Offer Choices

- Decide what the Uniteen can do instead of the offending behavior. The choice may be between desirable options, or between the desired behavior and the consequences of the present behavior. Offer only choices you are willing to accept or follow up on. Help process the choices and consequences as the teen needs, for clarity in their decision making.

Direct Their Behavior

- Decide specifically what you want the student to do (in place of their current behavior) and invite them to do that.

Looking Beyond an Incident to Address Motivations

Many steps merely address the situation at hand. Looking to the underlying reasons will help redirect misbehavior positively. Generally, teens misbehave for:

- Power = I belong only when I am in control, or proving no one can boss me.
- Attention = I belong only when I am being noticed.
- Revenge = I need to hurt others as I feel hurt.
- Helplessness = Others should not expect anything from me. I can't.

There are positive outlets for those same motivations:

- Teen's Goal
- Suggested Response by Leader
- Goal of Redirection

Power

- Withdraw from the conflict. (Fighting or giving in only increases the youth's desire for power.) Express confidence in the individual and encourage his/her decision-making.
- Shows self-discipline. Does own work. Is resourceful.

Attention

- Ignore misbehavior when possible. Give attention for positive behavior when the youth is not making a bid for it. Let the individual know their contribution counts and you appreciate it.
- Helps. Volunteers

Revenge

- Avoid feeling hurt, punishing or retaliating. Build trusting relationship; help the youth to see that they are loved.
- Ignores provocation. Withdraws from conflict to decide own behavior. Returns kindness for hurt.

Helplessness

- Stop criticism; focus on assets. Encourage positive attempts. Provide opportunity for accomplishment. Avoid getting hooked into pity.
- Attempts. Compliments self. Succeeds

Risks & Consequences to Leader of Addressing Behavior

There is no better laboratory in which to learn and experience the Law of Cause and Effect than a youth group. Your choices will have consequences, positive and negative.

- Visualize your teen group as a small lake. Any disturbance will send ripples across the water, and can cause changes you can't see on the bottom.
- Your decisions whether and how to address behavioral issues will affect others—positively or negatively, often in ways you cannot foresee. Your actions or inaction, along with others' reactions, may have the following consequences.
- Bring your group closer together
- Maintain or restore harmony within the group
- Influence certain members to become more involved in the program
- Handle the immediate situation, but allow underlying cause to continue

- Escalate the tension or conflict
- Redirect the emotional energy to new person/issue
- Draw parents, youth director and/or minister into the situation
- Cause certain members to stop coming to the program
- Cause entire family to stop coming to the church

An adolescent's perspective, emotional attachments and processing time frame is much different from an adult's.

- Things can bother teens which adults don't see as a big deal, yet show no emotional attachment to the issues we have (or expect them to have).
- Teens can go from antagonists to best friends in minutes.
- Reaction to physical harm will be affected by events leading up to the injury, fears and embarrassment. A student may try to brush off a serious injury but treat a simple bump like the end of the world.
- Teens often expect leaders to react or respond like their own parents do, and act accordingly.

Ironically, while some teens are challenging, a leader's greatest frustration will probably come from parents:

- Parents bring their own beliefs, issues and parenting history. Their reaction may have little to do with the incident at hand.
- You will have no idea what a teen has told their parents about you, the program or their issues.
- If parents have expectations or agendas not in line with your program's purpose, you will have to educate them, change the program or allow them to be disappointed.
- While some parents are wonderful in helping leaders anticipate and address challenges, other parents are in denial about their teen's behavior or choices.
- Parents often put more emotional energy into a situation than their teen does. Thirty minutes later, the teen may have put the issue behind them, while their parents will stew on it for days.
- Nothing will stir up a parent more than the perception that their child has been hurt or unfairly treated.

Determine what it is that you are reacting to.

- Talk to a co-leader to get another perspective. Check your own feelings to see if any part of the problem is actually 'your own stuff' that needs to be dealt with.
- You may be unclear exactly what it is that bothers you. Maybe it's not a particular action as much as an attitude. Try to get past symptoms to the core of your concern.
- If you are already under stress or have difficulty tolerating certain behaviors, make that clear to the students.

When experiencing repercussions from decisions:

- Get another perspective. Discuss the situation with your co-leaders, Youth and Family Ministry Director and minister.
- Use open, honest, and direct communication.
- Keep actions in line with the Principles you teach.
- Separate the behavior from the person.
- Remember that every situation results from the choices made by students, parents, co-leaders and you.
- Do what is best for the teen and the group.
- Be willing to admit when you made a mistake.

Punishment		vs	Logical Consequences	
Emphasizes power of authority.			Emphasizes group agreements.	
<i>“Do this, because I say so.”</i>	Becomes a power issue. Assumes participants need no say in matter, since leader can decide for them.		<i>“I thought the group has agreed... (to listen when others are talking). If you want to change that rule, let’s discuss it.”</i>	The rules aren’t the facilitator’s, but have been set by the group.
Places blame on you.			Encourages empathy with me.	
<i>“You are driving me up a wall. Stop it!”</i>	Assumes there is no valid motivation for behavior. Nor does teacher need to accept responsibility for their own reaction.		<i>“This is how I feel (about constantly being interrupted)... I’m here because this is important to me, and...”</i>	Recognizes validity of teen’s and adult’s feelings or actions, even if teen’s actions are inappropriate in this setting. If that’s how the teen wants to behave, they need to find a different space to express themselves.
Judges the person.			Separates behavior from the person.	
<i>“You’re so annoying.”</i>	Uses harsh words, shame or guilt to modify teen’s behavior.		<i>“I care about you, but I don’t like what you’re doing.”</i>	The person is acceptable, even if the behavior is not.

Punishment		vs	Logical Consequences	
Emphasizes past behavior.			Concerned with present/future behavior.	
<i>“You’ll never learn. I can’t count on you.”</i>	Judgment of current behavior prejudiced by past perceptions.		<i>“I know you can do this. What can I do to support you?”</i>	Recognizes that some agreements can pose challenges (we all have our days.) Encourage with positive reinforcement.
Demands compliance.			Presents choices.	
<i>“This is the way it’s going to be. Do as I say. Your preferences don’t matter.”</i>	Assumes participants can’t be trusted to make wise decisions. Disempowering.		<i>“You are capable of deciding. (If you choose not to, you’ve decided to let me make the decision).”</i>	Nothing is being ‘done to’ the teen. Respects the ability of the youth to make a thoughtful choice, which they will be responsible for.
Arbitrary.			Consequences related to misbehavior	
<i>“You deserve what you’re getting...”</i>	Consequences not necessarily consistent or related to act.		<i>“We’ve agreed, if we can’t focus on the meditation, we will sit quietly and not disrupt others. Otherwise, we will need to sit outside the meditation area with adult supervision.”</i>	Makes sense, and provides opportunity to learn from the experience.

Adapted from *A Parent’s Guide to Child’s Discipline* by R. Dreikurs & L. Grey, Hawthorne Books.