

| so you're a youth volunteer now...

A Truth Matters Ministries Resource
by Brody Jespersen



tips for the trenches

{2} Caring For The Kid Who Isn't Coming

If you have worked or volunteered in youth ministry for any length of time you have been faced with the reality of the kid who stops showing up. Be it the kid who was forced by their parents to give it a try, and after a few weeks stopped coming back, or the kid who was a long time participant and has been absent for some time. The reality is that you find yourself asking the questions "Why aren't they coming anymore?", "Are they not happy in the group?", "Did they leave because of me?", etc.

To help put this predicament into focus let's take a look at it through the lens of the parable of the prodigal son (I know they are probably not your children, and you are not their father, but I think the principles of the parable line up with the values we can share in our situations). I am sure you know the story – if not, go and have a look at Luke 15:11-32.

Here are some things that can maybe help us in light of this story:

1. When they want to go, you've got to let them go.

- Our role is not to force them to stay. We want them to stay because they love it. For some they just need to go and experience life away from the group, and we need to be ok with that.

2. Don't forget about and give up on them.

- If they do leave, our pursuit of them just needs to look different as we try to communicate that they are loved and missed on a regular basis.

3. Be a loving father, not an older brother when they come back.

- They may go away and make some really poor choices. If they do come back, your stature (not just you, but the whole group) needs to be in line with the Father. Celebrating and rejoicing at their return and in what God is doing in their journey. Fight to make sure seeds of rejection don't make their way into your group like the older brother.

Now there are 2 implications that we also need to be aware of to help us process this scenario:

1. We have to know when they leave. The reality is that our kids are not going to come to us like the older brother and say they are done – that's way too hard for a kid. They instead will start to drop off slowly in attendance until it becomes natural that they are not around anymore. We must fight to be aware of who is here and who is not. For a small group this is much easier than for a large church where there may be a need for attendance tracking. Make sure you know when your kids are not there.

2. We have to ask if our kids will look back positively at their experience in our group/ministry. The Prodigal looked back and longed for the life he had back home. He knew it far surpassed his current situation and because of his positive former experience he decided to return. We need to fight to make sure our kids feel a real sense of belonging in our groups.

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Some simple ways to start caring for the kid who isn't coming:

The kid who's missed a week: Put out a call/text that night letting them know that you missed them. Chances are they had homework pile up, are sick, or something simple kept them away that week. Doing this lets them know that their absence didn't go unnoticed, and that their participation in the group matters.

The kid who's missed a few weeks: Take them out for a one on one with the purpose of finding out what's going on. Is the group a low priority? Is there tension with other kids in the group? Are their parents unwilling/able to drive them? Your goal is to listen and find out what is keeping them from your community, and in doing so you again communicate that their presence matters.

The kid who's missed a few months: If you have taken them out, and you continue to let them know you are thinking about them and praying for them, eventually you might have to just release them. You need to remember that the kids who are attending need your attention as well. Hopefully they are plugging in to another healthy community, and if not your role then becomes that of praying for them and encouraging the others in the group to do the same.