

FOR STARTERS

What leaders have had an impact on your life?

What qualities do you respect in those leaders?

IN THE TRENCHES

Diane and Melissa were very close. Diane had been Melissa's small-group leader for two years, and in that time they had built a strong adult (Diane)-to-teenager (Melissa) friendship. Because they were so close, Melissa often confided in Diane about the things happening in her life.

One day, Melissa told Diane that she was struggling with an eating disorder. Melissa asked Diane not to tell anyone. Diane really struggled with this request. She wanted to respect Melissa's privacy, but she knew that Melissa's eating disorder was very serious and harmful. So Diane told Melissa that she couldn't keep the eating disorder a secret and that she would help Melissa tell her parents and walk by her side through any needed treatment.

Melissa was angry and hurt because she felt she'd been betrayed. Diane lovingly explained that she understood but had Melissa's best interest in mind. Because of her responsibility as an adult leader, she had to put aside being a friend to make sure Melissa's parents were involved and the proper steps were taken. Melissa did tell her parents, and Diane stuck by her, loving her through the recovery process. Diane did the right thing as an adult leader, and eventually her friendship with Melissa was restored and became stronger than ever.

TRAINING on the GO

One of your goals as a youth leader is to have strong and healthy relationships with students. However, it's important to maintain the difference between being a leader and being a friend. Problems can appear when those roles are reversed.

Most students have enough buddies in their lives and aren't actively looking for adults to be their best friends. A friendship with a caring adult is a by-product of a relationship-based youth ministry, and it's very important. But students need adults who are willing to lead them through life's tough situations. Anyone can be a buddy. It's difficult to be an adult leader in a teenager's life.

Since the leader-friend boundary is often difficult to discern, let's consider some differences.

A friend-first youth leader will obsess over whether students think he or she is cool. This youth leader might get overly passionate about teenage issues and side with students when they have disagreements with their parents. A friend-first youth worker might hesitate to challenge students to grow deeper in the faith.

A leader-first youth leader doesn't care as much about being liked but is trusted and respected, asks tough questions, and looks out for the students' best interests. While friends may emulate *some* of these qualities, leaders have all of these qualities. Don't get me wrong: A leader may resemble a friend, but the big difference is that the leader knows where to draw the line.

Students need adult leaders who will give practical direction, biblical guidance, and ongoing care. While students' reactions may be hurtful at times, they do respect an adult who provides difficult guidance in a loving way. Whether students are going through positive or difficult situations, they're looking for adults who will give helpful direction—telling them what they need, not what they want to hear.

Teenagers also need adults to give them guidance that's rooted in God's Word. Communicating God's direction is often difficult because it's not always easy or student-friendly. But students rely on adults to bring God's perspective into view. Friend-first youth workers do not often get beyond the surface of a situation before quickly turning to something else—something that's not as threatening as God's truth. Leaders need to be willing to challenge students to seek God in their daily lives. If you're not doing it, who will?

Teenagers find plenty of fake and surface relationships; they're looking for loving, authentic relationships. I want to challenge you to be something different than what students are used to. Seek to love students in an authentic, healthy way. Affirm them in a deeper way than their peers do.

Being an adult leader who truly loves students doesn't mean you won't be likeable and fun to be around. But consider *being liked* a bonus rather than your primary goal.

CONNECT to God's Word

"Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart. For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God." —1 Peter 1:22-23

- According to this verse, how can you develop sincere love for your students?
- In what ways will you be a leader first and a friend second?

Write a response and prayer to God here...

TO THE POINT

- Understand your primary goal as a youth leader.
- Don't be afraid to make tough decisions.
- Work toward the balance between leadership and friendship.

TRY IT

Choose three leaders in your life whom you really look up to. Get together with each one individually to learn from his or her leadership. Begin the get-togethers by thanking the leaders for the role they've played in your life. Then, ask questions about the way they lead. For example, ask:

- What is your biggest challenge in leadership?
- What are some situations where you had to choose leadership over friendship?
- How do you lead and maintain healthy relationships?
- What do you think is the biggest reward in leadership?

As a follow-up to your meetings, choose two things that you would like to work on in your own leadership to students. Put them into action with your students this week.

MAKE IT PERSONAL