

Mission Trips and Too-Busy Kids

Aren't these Millennials great?

I've been working with teens in the church for 17 years now, and I gotta tell ya, these kids today are the best bunch I've ever seen. While much of society doesn't seem to give them credit, today's young people are much more likely to be respectful of adults, to follow the rules, to work together effectively, and to get involved in improving their communities. And they're much less likely to abuse alcohol and other drugs, perpetrate violence, or slack off in school. (For a more definitive, if a tad dated, look at Millennials, read *Millennials Rising* by Neil Howe and William Strauss, Vintage Books, 2000.)

These amazing young people absolutely love going on your youth group mission trips.

But they also absolutely love sports camps, scholarship teams, their job, family activities, band, community choral groups, summer school, pre-ACT/SAT courses, peer juries, community action groups, driver's ed, arts camp, local summer theater, softball leagues, educational trips abroad, young United Nations programs, career development activities, volunteering for non-profit organizations, and any number of extremely valuable, worthwhile programs.

See, youth pastors aren't the only ones who've figured out how wonderful these young people are.

But you and I both know how formative mission trips can be for the faith lives of our kids. We know the power of putting them in a position to serve because of their love for God and neighbor, and how they grow by leaps and bounds in their relationship with Jesus on mission trips.

Yet, because they're so busy, we have a hard time getting them to commit to coming on the trips, let alone coming to the planning meetings (and our other youth ministry events). What can we do?

Here are things that worked for me...

1. **Get them while they're young.** Before teens get too crazy with their high school super-star activities, take them on a mission trip. Once you do that, they're hooked, and *they'll* find a way to work around their busy schedules. I once had parents upset because their daughters wanted to go on our mission trip instead of the orchestra tour in Europe that same time. They'd been on our mission trips and knew how powerful they were.
2. **Plan ahead. Way ahead.** Have you noticed parents keeping their kids' schedules on Outlook? Families are so busy it takes extra effort to keep everyone organized. Don't insult your parents by planning a major event like a mission trip at the last minute. (And for today's families, "the last minute" can be four months ahead of time!) Get it on the schedule *a year in advance* so they can schedule around it. Mission organizations that respect today's busy kids take reservations that early. Build credibility with parents by keeping them well-informed of meetings, due-dates, and payments. You *can't* over-communicate in this area.
3. **Get parents involved.** Communicate clearly the value of the mission trip, and encourage parents to talk with bosses, coaches, and other leaders about giving time off for the trip and planning sessions. Giving parents permission to

intervene on behalf of their kids can be empowering to them to make priorities in other scheduling issues, too.

4. **Require non-refundable deposits.** A \$50 non-refundable deposit seemed to be the magic number in my experience. If you emphasize there's a limited number of spaces available, and registration is a first-come, first-served basis, and in order to register you must have a \$50 non-refundable deposit, you'll get that commitment early. If parents have committed a monetary amount, they're more likely to make the mission trip a priority.
5. **Deliver the goods.** Do your part to make each mission trip a powerful spiritual growth experience that gives kids a hunger to serve again. Not only will you get kids excited about the mission trips, but if done right, you'll build in them a desire to know more about God all year long. Then you've created an opportunity to tell them about youth group meetings, Bible study, and other youth ministry activities throughout the year.

It may take a couple years of prayer and hard work, but stay faithful. If you keep at it long enough, your ministry in general—and the youth mission trips in particular—will reach a critical mass where kids start being your best promoters. Youth start insisting to other youth that they just *have* to go on the mission trip. You'll see real growth then, not just in numbers, but also in the faith of your students.

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