

# HUNGERING FOR HEROES

HOW TO BUILD A MENTORING YOUTH MINISTRY—WHERE EVERY KID IS SEEN WELL, KNOWN WELL, AND CONNECTED WELL

*by josh jenkins*

Just before we rolled out of the parking lot for our summer missions trip, I repeated my standard announcement that no CD players would be allowed. Many students surrendered their devices, but Jake didn't—I could see the headphones still draped around his neck.

I finished my announcements, then asked the group to get on the bus. As they did, I pulled Jake aside and repeated the CD player restriction. He told me he didn't have a player—just the headphones. When I asked why, he replied, "People leave me alone when I put them on."

Jake used his headphones to stay isolated from others in the group because he lacked basic friend-making skills. Even the prospect of making a new connection scared him into a "cone of silence." Like all kids he wanted to be known, but in his mind the price of connection far exceeded its rewards.

Jake is growing up in a culture that emphasizes passive entertainment-receiving skills. Very few of his cultural influences promote real skills for connecting interpersonally. He and others his age are masters at instant messaging and email, but too often fail to establish deep relationships—and they desperately need them.

Jesus showed us that true ministry happens in the

context of relationship—his ministry was personal more than it was corporate. Sure, he preached to large crowds, but the vast majority of his ministry efforts happened one-on-one and in small groups. That's one reason "relational ministry" has been the hot youth ministry catchphrase for so many years. I'm guessing most of your best moments in ministry have come in the context of a one-on-one or one-on-some relationship.

Our best chance to deeply influence our students for Christ is to help them connect deeply with others. That's why mentoring is such a primary focus of my own student ministry.

## **BUILDING AN 'EVERY-STUDENT-IS-KNOWN' MINISTRY**

Even if your group is small, it's virtually impossible to know every student well. Sure, we learn their names and know a few things about their interests and their family. But it's very difficult for just one person to truly know them—to understand them as people.

**1. Mentoring surfaces kids' real issues.** When your youth ministry becomes a mentoring ministry, you'll know your students—if not directly, then through trusted mentors. Your students need to know others in your ministry, but it's more important for them to

be known by others in your ministry.

Ryan, an active member in our group, seemed content and happy. In his eighth-grade year, I started a mentoring relationship with him. Not until then did the truth about Ryan come out. He was flunking out of school, aggressively fighting with his mother, suffering from attention deficit disorder and clinical depression, and he had no male role model in his life.

By the time I got involved with Ryan as a mentor, he had three years in our youth group under his belt. But no one really *knew* him. In the context of a focused, committed relationship, the real issues in his life surfaced. Now, freed from his isolation, Ryan has the tools to manage his struggles more effectively. Often, the young people who seem to have the most problems are really the ones who are most desperate to be known.

**2. Mentoring paves the way for experiential learning.** In Matthew 14 Peter walks on water, then falters after looking away from Christ. The teaching connection is easy—don't take your eyes off Jesus. We smile and nod our heads, but this was no forgettable platitude for Peter. This experience changed his life. If Jesus had *explained* how important it is to remain focused on him, would Peter have remembered? You can bet he remembered forever the feeling of *walking on water* for a moment, then faltering.

Peter learned this lesson experientially. And it's experiential learning that most influences our kids' lives. Mentoring relationships provide the perfect opportunity for well-prepared leaders to transform everyday experiences into experiential learning.<sup>1</sup>

Three students and I went to a local pizzeria to discuss a book that we'd been reading together. A young waitress named Sandy took our order, then questioned me about the books we were all carrying. I explained that we were part of a discipleship group at a local church. She pulled a chair up to our table and told us she could never attend church because she'd done too many wrong things in her life. She talked about her husband leaving her, the financial problems that plagued her life, and mistakes she'd made.

The students later confided that they could almost feel her guilt as she described her past mistakes. We never did discuss the book that day because God had given us a divine appointment with one of his suffering children. We shared with her Christ's forgiveness and love, and we invited her to church. The next Sunday she was there.

Our meeting with Sandy certainly had an impact on her life, but it had equal impact on those three students. Those guys will never forget that encounter, nor will they forget that God is at work in and through us, all the time. In contrast, they likely won't remember any lecture on evangelism they've ever heard.

**3. Mentoring produces some great "byproducts."** Researchers writing in a recent *Journal of Family and*



*Consumer Sciences*<sup>2</sup> report that mentoring is a powerful tool of prevention in kids' lives. When we help students connect with adults one-on-one or in very small groups, we can expect these fruits in our young people: reduced delinquency, increased academic success, improved interpersonal competence, greater resistance to negative peer pressure, fewer disciplinary problems, and a reduced strain on family relationships.

These practical benefits are important and visible to the parents involved in your ministry. But the good fruit doesn't stop there. A quality mentoring program provides a virtual "leadership factory" for your ministry. Mentored students typically experience such growth that they're prepared to step into leadership roles. They've experientially learned the value

- 1 If you're ready to explore the power of experiential learning in your ministry in greater depth, pick up one of Thom and Joani Schultz's two books on the transforming and biblical power of active learning. Their first book on the subject is *Why Nobody Learns Much of Anything at Church (And How to Fix It)*, and their latest is *The Dirt on Learning*. Both are from Group Publishing, and you can check them out by going to [www.grouppublishing.com](http://www.grouppublishing.com) and using the search tool to find both titles.
- 2 This journal is published by the American Association of Family and Consumer Sciences. You can discover more of what the organization offers, and sign up for the journal, by going to [www.aafcs.org](http://www.aafcs.org) on the Web.

## YOUR STUDENTS NEED to know others in your ministry, but it's more important for them to *be known* by others in your ministry.

of connecting with others for the purpose of serving them.

Also, mentors can insightfully assess a student's spiritual growth. This information can help you evaluate your ministry so your students receive a great "spiritual education." This growth assessment opportunity is invaluable, but its success depends on qualified and trained mentors who understand their job.

### WHAT A GREAT MENTOR LOOKS LIKE

A mentor acts in four basic roles to encourage growth in a teenager.

**1. Mentors are guides.** Good mentors know how to gently provide guidance or make a student's path clearer. Kids will ask their mentors some tough questions. You need people who can provide gentle, biblical answers to these questions—answers that are untainted by condescension and a judgmental attitude.

**2. Mentors are great strategists.** An effective mentor works to develop an action plan for each student under her care. Every teenager has unique needs that require unique strategies to help them move ahead in their spiritual lives. Some might need accountability in their personal devotions, others don't have even a basic understanding of salvation, and still others may need help overcoming an addiction. When you focus on mentoring in your group, your kids can get their needs addressed individually and strategically.

**3. Mentors are ready and willing to challenge your kids.** Effective mentoring pushes students to set goals and attain them. Kids in mentoring relationships should set personal, spiritual, and educational goals with their mentors. These goals should be high but attainable, and the mentor should consistently monitor progress toward them.

**4. Mentors are good friends.** An effective mentor is a friend, not a buddy. "A friend is always loyal, and a brother is



born to help in time of need" (Proverbs 17:17). "Buddies" play favorites and encourage activities that have no real purpose. But a mentoring friend speaks with purpose every time he meets with a student. The mentor's strategy for a student determines the purpose of every activity and interaction with that teenager.

### HOW TO GET STARTED

If you make mentoring just another program in your ministry, you'll diminish its impact. Instead, make it essential to every aspect of your ministry.<sup>3</sup>

**1. Begin with a pilot program—mentor a couple of students yourself.** You'll learn a lot about how students change and react to mentoring, and you'll be better prepared to train other mentors. By the time our pilot program was complete, we had students literally begging to be involved

**3** It's likely not as hard as you think to make the shift to a mentoring youth ministry. For starters, adapt what you're already doing to include mentoring. For example, if you already use small groups, train your adult leaders to also serve as mentors.

## A MENTORING SUCCESS STORY

**Bryan was an energetic sixth-grader when he joined our middle-school youth group. He quickly forged friendships and seemed content, well-adjusted, and happy.**

But when he was in eighth grade, we got quite a wake-up call about his life. Late one Friday evening, I received a frantic call from Bryan's mother. Through her tears, she explained that Bryan had threatened to hurt her. I could hear Bryan's voice in the background, angrily yelling at his mother. I went to their home and helped settle things down for the evening. The next day I spoke with a colleague about the situation and we were dumbfounded by what had happened to this seemingly happy student.

When Bryan agreed to be a part of a mentoring relationship, we discovered the truth about his life. He had no male role model, regularly directed violent outbursts at his mother,

was failing in school, and was experimenting with alcohol. How could we have been so out of touch, so wrong about him?

Bryan and his mentor began meeting twice a week. Together, they set goals for every area of his life. Very early in the relationship, Bryan began to open up about his anger—this became a regular topic in their meetings. Each week they read Scripture passages on anger. Bryan's mentor coached him to redirect his anger into other activities and release his need to control others.

Today, Bryan is experiencing breakthrough progress. His anger is very much under submission to Christ, his grades have improved dramatically, and his experimentation with alcohol stopped entirely. Bryan is connected, and this connection is bringing true life change.

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in a mentoring group. The excitement had spread very quickly.

**2. After completing your pilot program, recruit other mentors.** Basically, you're looking for strong Christians—not people who have all the answers, but people who aren't threatened by tough questions. They should be folks who have a basic understanding of the issues facing today's young people so they're not shocked by a student's *real* life. Have potential mentors each complete an application that includes questions about their background, beliefs, family, and personal faith story. Also, make sure to do criminal background checks on all applicants.<sup>4</sup>

**3. Once you've selected mentors, begin your training process.** Base your training on your pilot program.<sup>5</sup> Some important points to cover:

- Mentors are friends, not buddies—their interactions with students must have purpose.
- Require mentors to keep you posted on all their activities with students, and every activity should have a purpose that's consistent with the strategy for that student.
- Mentors should have regular meetings with their students. The focus could be to discuss a book that the mentor and student are reading together.<sup>6</sup>
- Mentors should never “preach at” their students. They should create a safe atmosphere for kids to openly share their struggles and concerns. What students need most is a listening ear. The goal is to offer gentle guidance that points

a teenager to God for answers to life's questions.

● Mentors should be available to their young people. The mentor and student should exchange phone numbers, email addresses, and instant message IDs at their first meeting.

● No one should be mentoring more than a few teenagers at one time. Mentors with lots of time might be able to handle as many as five kids, but the typical load is just one or two.

● All mentoring relationships should be same-gender. Under this system, students feel more comfortable and better able to trust their mentor.

● Provide each mentor with a written job description that outlines your expectations. Keep all paperwork filed in

- ④ Check out these two background-check services for more information, including a scope of the tools they provide and costs: Accufax at [www.accufax-us.com](http://www.accufax-us.com) and ScreenNow at [www.screenow.com](http://www.screenow.com).
- ⑤ You can expand your mentor training to include anything specific to your ministry. For example, if you have a “rite of passage” event tied to kids getting their driver's licenses, recruit mentors that can coach them on their driving skills.
- ⑥ Authors often write books with a mentoring purpose in mind. For example, male mentors can use books such as Patrick Morely's *The Young Man in the Mirror* (Broadman & Holman) or John Eldredge's *Wild at Heart* (Thomas Nelson) to spark discussion on a variety of issues. Female mentors can use books such as Jan Meyers' *The Allure of Hope* (NavPress) or Paula Rinehart's *Strong Women, Soft Hearts* (W Publishing Group).

## THE POWER OF ONE-ON-ONE

by jonathan mckee

Jesse walked into the Taco Bell across the street from the school and quickly found the rest of the youth staff huddled in one of the corner booths. Jesse, like the rest of his fellow volunteers, reserved five hours a week for hanging out with kids. It was Tuesday night and they'd just finished their weekly youth group meeting—74 students, eight volunteers, one overworked youth worker, and only two minor injuries.

After some prayer time, Jay (the youth pastor) asked everyone to talk about how their time with students was going.

“Jessica is really opening up,” said Kristi. “I think the discussion on fathers really hit home for her. I'm going to hook up with her this weekend for a milkshake and talk with her more about it.”

“Justin liked the talk too,” Jason added. “I think he finally might be interested in something more than just basketball and girls.”

Jesse thought about his time with TJ. This guy had been a handful since day one, but had responded well to Jesse's attention. Jesse always managed to be on TJ's team during games and made sure he was in his small group. Last weekend Jesse had him over to his house to work on his car.

Greasy hands and pizza opened up doors to conversation with TJ that Jesse never expected.

Youth group activities are great, small-group sharing is very valuable, but nothing opens doors like one-on-one time with students. In a world where the only words TJ usually hears from adults are, “Did you finish your homework?” or “You're 15 minutes late!” or “Hey, you can't skateboard here!” the positive attention he receives from an affirming adult is making a huge impact.

Jay built his ministry on a foundation of caring adults who inject themselves into students' lives. Each volunteer commits to Tuesday nights, weekly staff meetings, and quarterly staff training times. But their most important commitment is to milkshake conversations, inviting students for dinner, or taking them to football games.

Nine adults, each devoting one-on-one time to a handful of students. Do the math. They're making a difference for Christ, one life at a time.

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your church office.

**4. After thorough training, start placing students with mentors.** When you're ready to match kids with mentors, consider their family life, personality, spiritual maturity, and life interests. After you make your matches, invite individual students to participate. Talk about the great opportunity for growth and leadership skill development. Consider planning a retreat to kick off the program. Never force anyone to participate.

Jenny came from a strong Christian family, but after eighth grade she grew disillusioned with church. Almost overnight she wrote off her church experience as a show—a fake environment. Her relationship with Christ was clearly suffering, and she felt confused and stressed about her true identity. She bounced from friendship to friendship and from one activity to another.

So I hoped to pair Jenny with an adult mentor who'd experienced many of the same struggles. Jenny wanted no part of this. She was completely unwilling to even consider such an arrangement. What was her fear? That someone would know her true self and she'd be exposed as imperfect. She was afraid of vulnerability.

Jenny was not ready to involve herself in a mentoring relationship, at least not formally. We had to address other issues with her first. Mentoring won't work unless both mentor and student are willing and involved.

**5. Re-evaluate your ministry's mentoring relationships after a short time.** If a particular relationship isn't working, change it. Personality conflicts or other issues can prevent two people from connecting. Also, survey your students and their parents so you can monitor successes and failures. This will help you continually evaluate and change your mentoring ministry to meet your students' needs.

**6. Your mentoring success ultimately depends on your commitment to recruiting and training quality people.** Find good people, no matter their age or gender, and invest in them. When you do, they, in turn, will invest in your kids in ways you never could. Soon, quality relationships will be your ministry's hallmark. ■



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