

# Working with Youth Volunteers at VBS... and Beyond!

Youth volunteers are a powerful resource for VBS, bringing fresh perspectives, connections with younger kids, and infectious energy that never seems to run out. All these benefits don't happen by accident, though; just as with adult volunteers, maximizing your youth participation takes an investment of time and attention. Here are some of our favorite ways to elevate youth (and all!) volunteerism to its highest potential:

## 1. Set clear expectations.

Most teens perform best with specific instructions, so communication of expectations, rewards, and consequences is essential. Don't leave anything unsaid (especially for first-timers), and make sure you present instructions in multiple formats to include all types of learners (talks for verbal learners, images for visual, role-play/games for physical, etc.).

## 2. Incentivize and appreciate.

Even in summer, teens can be exceptionally busy with athletics, jobs, family, and friends, so you want to create an atmosphere of appreciation and rewards for excellence. This needn't be an expensive endeavor; many teens are thrilled with coupons to local restaurants and theaters, \$5.00 music gift cards, or even earning toward other youth programs and projects. You can also offer college reference letters for superlative participants.

## 3. Let them lead.

Adults may hesitate to entrust leadership roles to youth for fear of them not being responsible enough, however, giving teens responsibility can be a catalyst to boosting their confidence and encouraging growth into leadership. Consider appointing youth in groups or partnering them with adults. Empower your youth by including them in your training sessions, and/or offer special training just for them.

## 4. Make it fun!

Give teens enjoyable responsibilities as well as dedicated time to socialize and play. Also, allow teens the same consideration as adults when making assignments; find out what their strengths are, then assign them strategically. Include youth in VBS team activities, and keep it fun with games, healthy competition, and special snacks.

## 5. Appreciate their efforts.

Volunteering takes as much sacrifice and investment from teens as it does adults; therefore, give your youth volunteers the same level of respect that you do your adults. Allow them the freedom to contribute their ideas and talents without fear of rejection or condescension. Be purposeful to communicate to the whole team that youth volunteers are just as valuable as their adult counterparts.

## 6. Keep it positive.

Teenagers hear the word *don't* a lot. *Don't get on your phone, don't go out of bounds, don't get in the way...* Try to frame your needs and expectations in positive language, and even include the word *please* with your directives. Most of all, communicate that you assume the best of your teenagers until proven otherwise.

## 7. Build relationships.

It's easy to get so caught up in compliance with policies and training that you forget to get to know your youth volunteers as people, too. Ensure that you are creating opportunities for students and adults to connect one-on-one. Look for common ground in conversation, and have a few questions ready to help you break the ice if necessary. Tell them how God is working in your life. Ask well-placed questions and listen carefully. You'll be glad you did!