

KEEPING KIDS FROM FALLING THROUGH THE CRACKS

“THE GRAPEVINE IS STILL STRONG AND CRACK KIDS WHO FEEL LIKE THEY’VE BEEN PUBLICLY REBUKED ‘IN ABSTENTIA’ WILL NEVER RETURN.”

Transient teens are a constant struggle for most youth ministers, and bringing them inside the “inner circle” can be an arduous task at best. We constantly seesaw between the crowd (those who show) and the congregation (those who are involved). This intangible group constitutes what I’ve dubbed the “crack difference.” A nebulous concept at best, the “crack difference” is the amount (of kids) between what we draw and what we maintain. Some refer to it as the gap between what we run and what we catch, or as the difference between those interested and those committed.

Even the best of ministries deal with a “crack difference.” The key, as you are aware, is to get your crack difference as low as possible. Though this task is not easy, some tangible, concrete methods do exist which, if used consistently over time, can lower the number of disappearing students.

Here are a few proven “caulking” ideas that can help fill the cracks through which your kids may be falling.

1. **Identify the cracks.** What is causing kids to slip through your fingers? What enables kids to come in the front door and leave through the back door without anyone noticing? All of us are aware of kids when they’re with us; the key is to be aware of kids when they’re not.
2. **Bring in some “top guns” who will fill the cracks.** Contrary to first impressions, your best “top guns” may not be adults. They will be young people – peers – who are totally and radically sold out to God and committed to your ministry and the youth group. Remember – crack kids will come once for an event, a few times for a leader, but forever for a friend! Keep your “top guns” focused on a small number of kids – one is ideal – and let them do their magic.
3. **Get the word out.** One of the surest ways to let kids fall through the cracks is to keep it to yourself. When you know someone is missing, get the word out. Develop a system where your leaders are notified weekly of anyone who is absent or consistently misses week after week. It only makes sense: the more people we have looking for an item, the more chances it’ll be found. This same principle applies to people. Communicate to your group that “Susie” has not been around lately and you’ll find that “Susie” is easier to locate and bring back in the fold.
4. **Reward and congratulate attendance** instead of recognizing and scolding absences, especially when verbally opening your time with your group. How often do we, within the first few minutes of beginning a group meeting, say something like, “Where is everybody tonight?” or “The crowd is down tonight, isn’t it?” Without realizing, we subconsciously draw attention, not to the positive, but to the negative, making those in attendance feel as though they’re not the ones you really wanted to show up. Unknowingly, we generate a second-class sentiment among those present, which in turn lowers overall group morale and community. Celebrate who is there! It’s easy to spot the negative, but courageous leadership celebrates the positive, thus encouraging future similar behavior.
5. **Invest in the successful element of small groups.** Ever wonder why small groups have become increasingly popular? It’s simple: They work! When kids connect to an intimate group of friends who genuinely care, whether peers or adults, spiritual growth occurs, life-change takes place, and involvement soars. The relational impact of successful small groups creates a “win-win” situation

for everyone involved! Having seen first hand the success of small groups in various formats, I follow a simple rule-of-thumb: we may edit our small groups, but we will never delete them.