

Stay Home, Stay Connected

Authentically Engaging Youth Through Digital Media

Our young people are at home. Some of them are in big, spacious houses, with plenty of room and backyards to play in. They are taking long walks around the neighborhood and exploring their surroundings. Some of our youth are in tiny cramped spaces with several relatives, just trying to get by. Many are somewhere in between. No matter what their situation, our teenagers fall into Generation Z and that means they are global citizens, digital natives, and service oriented. This generation is resilient, determined, and they crave authenticity. As faith leaders, we can offer something unique in this time of grief and crisis. You don't have to produce super engaging videos or daily content, just use your gifts to be present and authentic; use this time to focus on connection and community. Let's face it, you are probably already doing this in some form or another. Here are some ideas to help you be present with your youth even when you are not physically with them.

The Gift of Technology:

You are probably already familiar with a video conferencing platform called "Zoom." It is great to use with small to medium sized groups. You just send the link out to whomever you want to join, and voila, instant group video chat. There is even a feature where you can breakout the group into smaller groups! One pro tip as you debate using this platform: based on your child protection policy, you will need to loop in at least one more adult on your Zoom calls. This is a good digital practice of making sure more adults are in the "room."

How can you use Zoom?

- Lead a Bible Study
- Have a time for prayer and devotion
- Check-in with each youth, making sure to give each youth a chance to speak and talk about what is happening in their homes. Participants can also "raise their hand to speak," which makes it easier for the introverts and soft-spoken youth to let you know they have something to say.
- Play games together (scavenger hunts are a popular choice)
- You can also record on Zoom. Maybe you use it to record a tutorial. Recently, my youth and I used it to record our answer to an Instagram hand washing challenge together.

Zoom is a great tool with lots of cool features. As the host, you can mute participants if need be and share cool videos or a fun site with the whole group. You can see if it is right for your group by checking out more info here: <https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/206618765-Zoom-Video-Tutorials>

Be aware that Zoom isn't perfect. You will want to make sure you enable safety features like a waiting room and limit the share screen function to the host(s). One major tip is not to post the zoom link info anywhere publicly. You can find more info about security features and other tips here: <https://www.wired.com/story/keep-zoom-chats-private-secure/>

Another option may be Google Duo. The maximum video chat group size just jumped from 8 to 12, it is fairly user friendly and offers end to end encryption. Maybe you gather youth in small groups by grade level and check in with them using this platform. More info can be found here: <https://www.pocket-lint.com/apps/news/google/138528-google-duo-video-call-app-how-does-it-work-and-does-it-offer-voice-calls>

Virtual Youth Group (it's a thing):

Teenagers listen to their peers. That is perfectly developmentally appropriate. In the tween years, they move their attention to what their peers are saying and doing. Gathering the group and facilitating healthy, faithful connection amongst them will help keep your youth group connected in more ways than one. We have established you can meet with the youth group over Zoom (or use another video platform), but then what do you do? This whole digital youth ministry thing feels awkward and it's difficult during this time and that is ok. You can't read the energy of the room like you normally would as a youth worker. It's tricky. But a good plan goes a long way here. Map out what you plan to do with your youth, including a timeline, and keep those notes handy. That way, if the conversation goes off the rails, you can bring them back together. Keep it to an hour or so, don't try to make this your regular youth group. Everyone is tired in the pandemic, and again, that's ok.

Once you have them gathered in the "room:"

- Play a game like Farkle or Heads Up! (which is a free app)
- Provide "Good News" videos or podcasts each week with stories of hope, kindness, things celebrated through email, Instagram, Facebook or other social media platforms. You can follow up during the youth group check-in time.
 - Some suggestions include:
 - StoryCorps — <https://storycorps.org/heartwarming>
 - Upworthy — <https://www.upworthy.com/videos/>
 - "Some Good News":
https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCOe_y6KKvS3PdIfb9q9pGug/featured
- Practice the Examen. It's an Ignatian liturgical practice that has often been adapted as "highs and lows" or "pows and wows." Essentially, it gives you the opportunity to call on each youth separately and ask where they are struggling and where they have seen God in their lives.
- Book/Movie Club - Identify young adult novel or movie to read or watch as a group and then gather to discuss virtually.
- Share a Skill/Talent: Ask youth to volunteer to share a skill or talent they have and teach the group virtually. You could also invite special guests who are members of other generations to be part of the skill/talent share.
 - Suggestions: baking or cooking their favorite recipe, a magic trick, playing a musical instrument, knitting or cross stitching
- If you use a group messaging platform (like GroupMe), you can use it to discuss joys and concerns, pass on interesting videos, or links you want the youth to check out. Use this group chat to keep the connection going through the week. When you gather for virtual youth group or Zoom Bible Study, you can reference the discussion. You may have used this group chat in the past for conferences or trips, but this helps you keep connected since you aren't physically seeing each other every week. Pro Tip: Make sure another adult is on this group text as well, or whatever fits in accordance with your protection policy.
 - You can also use this platform to coordinate planning for youth group and to share other virtual youth group info.

Take Care of Yourself and One Another

- Help Equip Families. The research shows Faith Formation happens at home. We youth workers know that we are only part of the puzzle. Families are stressed and overwhelmed during this time. So how can you connect to parents and youth families? Be present and be a resource. Pass on helpful links and faith formation practices you can do at home. This list is a great place to start: <http://www.traci-smith.com/covid-19-100-ideas-for-ministers-and-ministry-leaders/>
- Teenagers may not realize just how this pandemic is affecting them spiritually, physically or emotionally. Remind them that this is a time of collective grief. This is a great article that reminds us to name the emotions and help our youth name their anxieties and fears in a brave, accepting space: <https://hbr.org/2020/03/that-discomfort-youre-feeling-is-grief>.

- Talk to them about a Grief Checklist. Yes, the exhausted feeling is normal. Yes, it is scary. Yes, you still must do schoolwork, but remember to also to drink water, get fresh air, move your body, eat good food, and get good sleep.
- Connect them with people of other generations. One way is to make a list of older members of the congregation and encourage the youth to write letters expressing love and hope to them.

Engage the Mind, Body & Spirit

- Keep a mindfulness or gratitude journal. Encourage them to document moments of gratitude each day. This is a way to encourage them to stay in the present moment and to help ward off anticipatory grief.
 - Remind youth that journaling can be completed on computer, or on their phone, in a composition book, using any paper they may have around the house.
- Nature walk. Remind them that even though we are spending lots of time inside, it is Spring, a time of growth and beauty — encourage them to take a nature walk, if it is safe to do so. Ask them to note God's creation on their walks and share with the group. They can share photos, draw a picture, journal about it, or tell the group about it at the next virtual gathering.
- Yoga. Youth are experiencing anxiety, uncertainty and disappointment which can take a toll both mentally and physically.
 - If you have someone in the congregation that practices yoga, ask them if they would be willing to record a 10-15-minute yoga practice specifically targeted to youth or find/provide short video that can be used via YouTube.
- Meditation. Encourage youth to find a quiet, comfortable place where they are able to relax. You can encourage them to check out the [D365.org](https://www.d365.org) daily meditation/devotional app.
- Prayer Jar. You can encourage families to keep a jar in the house or for youth to keep one in their rooms and add prayers as they think of them on scraps of paper. On Sunday, as part of their Sabbath worship, the family (or the youth individually) can reach into the jar and use the prayers during their prayer/meditation time.
- Creativity is an amazing outlet to relieve stress or to use whilst praying.
 - Provide coloring pages and encourage youth to put on their favorite music and get creative using color. <https://www.planesandballoons.com/2018/02/13/stress-relief-coloring-pages/>
<https://www.planesandballoons.com/2018/02/23/positive-quotes-coloring-pages/>

Encouraging youth to practice self-care, to connect spiritual practices to their daily lives, and to work through stress and anxiety will be important during this current pandemic. Although our worshipping communities are not gathering in person, we can remain connected as members of Christ's body through technology, through prayer, and through caring for one another. Remind your youth that you are there for them and that we are all doing our best, day by day.

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Presbyterian Youth Workers Association: <https://www.pywa.org>



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