

STEPPING STONES



WALKING alongside

strengthening congregational community ministries

»» Step by Step: At-Risk Youth Ministry ««

»» GETTING STARTED

What is At-Risk Youth Ministry?

Faith communities involved in ministries with at-risk youth intervene in the lives of children and adolescents who are vulnerable to drug and alcohol abuse, violence, suicide, depression, gang activity, incarceration, academic probation, or any combination of those elements. A ministry with at-risk youth focuses on building meaningful relationships with young people through church and community sponsored programs. These relationships and ministries establish a safe place for children and adolescents to interact while developing social skills, good study habits and a healthy self-esteem.

Why is there a need?

America's youth encounter a number of challenges to healthy social, physical, psychological, and spiritual development. Some challenges include family dysfunction, exposure to violence and substance abuse, low socioeconomic status, peer pressure and lack of supervision. For example, because of the high cost of childcare, approximately 8 million children ages 5-14 regularly spend time without any adult supervision, and lack of adult supervision is linked to skipping school, alcohol and drug use and criminal behavior.¹ Children and youth need adults to make positive investments in their development in an environment that is secure.

America's Promise, an organization devoted to developing programs for at-risk youth, reported that in 2003:

- 740,000 children were victims of violent crimes in their schools.
- 845,000 children were victims of violent crimes outside of the school walls.
- 1,600 children under the age of 17 were murdered.
- 12.4 million children are at risk of hunger.
- Approximately 30% of students do not finish high school.
- Approximately 70% of 8th graders score below proficiency levels in math and in English.

Stepping out in faith

Here are some "first steps" to consider before your congregation engages in a ministry for at-risk youth:

- Participate in assessments designed to discover the scope of the need in your community. Begin by visiting with local school administrators to discuss at-risk populations and individual teens in your community.
- Research existing programs that serve at-risk youth in your area. Find out as much as you can about these programs, including gaps in services.
- Identify the resources your congregation possesses to meet the discovered needs. Use this information to design a strategy for implementing a new program, join an existing one, or revitalize an old one.
- Creatively educate your congregation about the needs and encourage them to get involved.
- Recruit individuals from the church who are interested in this type of ministry.



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What this ministry might look like in your church

Congregations can choose any level of involvement, but here are a few suggestions:

- Volunteer at an after-school tutoring, sports, or creative arts program.
- Partner with a nonprofit agency such as Big Brother Big Sister or the Boys and Girls Club to provide mentoring for teens. (visit www.mentoring.org to locate a mentoring program near you).
- Begin a sports program at your church or sponsor a team of young people participating in a city league.
- Provide financial assistance to children interested in attending summer camp.
- Offer a safe place for teens to socialize, like a weekly coffee house.
- Teach a financial literacy, resume-building or computer skills class for adolescents and their parents.
- Adopt an apartment complex and host activities for residents on a regular basis, including family-wide events.
- Evaluate your church's Youth Ministry program and brainstorm ways to increase at-risk teen involvement.

Backpacks

The Walking Alongside website provides a Backpack of additional resources and examples for this specific ministry. Included are published articles, websites, selected books, testimonials and existing ministries with contact information.

Pathways

Learn from the first-hand account of those already engaged in this specific ministry. Plus, develop networking contacts as go-to sources to explore solutions to challenges or celebrations of successes.

Food for the Journey

A short devotional based on scripture that can be used in church bulletins, as a Moment for Mission during worship or as an introduction to a Bible study.

Reference

- ¹ Aizer, Anna. (2004). "Home Alone: Supervision After School and Child Behavior." *Journal of Public Economics*, 88, (9-10), 1835-1848.