

8 Tips for Reaching Hard to Reach Youth

1 Listen, particularly to what they are not saying verbally.
More often than not young people tend to tell what they want, and/or what they think we, as adults, want to hear. It is, therefore, our responsibility to be “good listeners”. What’s in the unspoken? What are the words between the lines?

2 Remember from whence you came.
While it may be difficult to believe at this point in your life, who you are now is not who you have always been. As adults who work with youth it would be to our advantage to remind ourselves that some of our most challenged youth are who (some of us) used to be. Remembering, therefore, allows us to extend the same patience and understanding we once wanted or needed someone to extend to us.

3 Step out of the box that is your own worldview.
Our family ate dinner together at 6:00 p.m. We had to ask permission to go over a friend’s house. We did not party with our parents. We did not use profanity in front of adults. Many of today’s youth are living in a different world; in different family structures; and, in some respects, are being raised by parents or guardians who have no expectations or very low expectations. While exposing our youth to new ideas is important, we must be careful not to insist that our worldview is the only worldview; and we must be sensitive to what is not familiar to them.

4 Share your own deliverance process...to the extent it is appropriate and applicable.
There is nothing like believing in change you can actually see. Some of our youth simply need a living, breathing, up close and personal example of who they can become. To this end, your story might just be the impetus for the change a hard to reach youth may need.

5 Tell young people the truth about themselves...diplomatically, gingerly, and compassionately.
Young people don’t need our pity. They don’t need our sarcasm. They don’t need our judgment. And they don’t need us making excuses for them and their behavior. Rather, what our young people need is for us to candidly, yet diplomatically; gingerly, yet firmly; and compassionately, not sympathetically tell them the truth that others may be afraid to point out; or the truth that just might save their lives.

6 Spend more time focusing on the assets rather than the liabilities.
Every young person – regardless how challenging – has value. Every young person has a hidden treasure within. Every young person innately has a gift or talent that needs to be discovered and brought to bear. Too often, though, because hard to reach youth tend to get into trouble, fight, skip school, sell drugs or get locked up we reduce them to behavior (which is the liability) instead of directing them to their gift or talent (which is the asset).

7 Be prepared with real, relevant, identifiable examples of people who were perhaps where they currently are, yet persevered or are still persevering.
In many respects, the most accomplished among us did not come from rich, affluent families where everything was well all the time. To the contrary, many of the rich, famous, celebrity style personalities our youth admire grew up in unfavorable environments, dysfunctional families, were not the smartest in their class, and even found themselves in compromising positions in their youth. We, therefore, must tell our youth the entire success journey of those they admire so that they can then have a point of reference for their own success journey.

8 Be mindful that for every messed up young person you see there is a messed up adult you do not see.
To a great degree, it is not his fault. It is not her fault. Plain and simple, many of our hard to reach youth are the products of their environments and their immediate influences. To a great degree, their deviant, criminal, anti-social behavior is learned behavior that has been passed down from one generation to the next. Therefore, before he/she can learn new ways of behaving, he/she has to unlearn old ways of behaving; ways that were, unfortunately, instilled (directly or indirectly) by adults young people have inherited.



“Delinquency is often an alternative to not being heard; for not being tended to; for not feeling validated, affirmed or accepted.”

Mischa P. Toland