

# CRASH COURSES *in* YOUTH MINISTRY SPEAKING ADOLESCENT

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A crash course (in training or education) condenses lots of practical material so that you can read and understand it quickly. A crash course is not where we strap you behind the wheel of a youth ministry bus, point you downhill towards a target and say, *“Hope you don’t crash!”* as you hit every bump possible on the road ahead.

Each of these crash courses in youth ministry are loaded with practical tips and basic wisdom that you can read today and put in to practice tomorrow. If you are a part-time or no-time (amazing volunteer!) youth worker, these crash courses are especially for you. (They’re also great for anyone leading a youth ministry. Just saying.)

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# INTRODUCTION

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## LANA AND JESSIE WERE SITTING IN MY OFFICE TRYING TO DISCUSS A BIG CONFLICT IN JESSIE'S LIFE.

Lana (Jessie's mom) was expressing deep concern to her daughter and wanting someone to help them hear each other. Lana looked at Jessie with the deep compassion of a worried mom and said, "Jess, I am concerned for you."

Jessie looked at me. "See?! Did you see how she said that? She is so mean!"

There was absolutely nothing mean about anything in Lana's demeanor or words or tone, but Jessie didn't experience that. She didn't experience her mother's concern because, in part, her brain was working against her. During adolescence, there is major renovation going on in the brain that makes a very important part of the brain, the prefrontal cortex, not work properly. Guess what one of its functions is? Yep. Interpreting nonverbal communication!

A fascinating study was done to explore this aspect of brain development in adolescents. The researchers would show a face showing an emotion, like fear, to people and ask them to name the emotion. When they showed the fear face to adults, 100 percent correctly



identified it. But when they showed the same picture to adolescents, the youth correctly identified the emotion at only 50 percent. Deborah A. Yuregul-Todd, PH.D found that teens did no better naming the emotion that went with a face than if they were just guessing!

# 01 WHEN YOU CAN'T TRUST NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION INTERPRETATION

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THAT STUDY ON FACIAL RECOGNITION HAS MAJOR IMPLICATIONS ABOUT HOW WE COMMUNICATE WITH THE TEENS IN OUR LIVES AND MINISTRIES.

First, we need to know that a lot of misunderstanding will take place that is completely beyond our control. We will stand in front of a group of teens with all the sincerity of Jessie's mom, and half the room will completely miss it. We need to know that, plan on it, and not be surprised when students misunderstand what we were communicating.

Second, this further underscores the need for other adults to be present when we are doing ministry with teens. Because it is so easy for teens to misread your facial expressions, it is possible for them to think you are being mean, joking inappropriately, or even (heaven forbid) acting romantic when all you are doing is asking them if they brought money for pizza. Having other adults around with functioning prefrontal cortexes helps students process when they walk up to the adult and say, "Man, Jeremy was really mad about the whole pizza money thing." Or the adult can back you up when a parent calls to complain how you were making fun of their kid for forgetting their money.



In addition to all that, it is important to name your emotions and even reference your face when it makes sense. When talking to the youth group about the rules at the beginning of a retreat, you might add, “Alright students, I need to have a serious talk with you. See? This is my serious face. These rules are for real and are really important for you to follow.”

Or, when you make a joke during a lesson that students miss, you might say, “That was a joke. I wouldn’t literally swallow a live goldfish to show you guys how much I love being your youth pastor.”

Being clear about your emotions not just with your face, but with your words can help bridge the gap in the brains of the teens in your group.

# 02 WHEN THE FORECAST IS ALL WRONG

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## THE SECOND THING THE PREFRONTAL CORTEX IS RESPONSIBLE FOR IS FORECASTING OUTCOMES.

It is the part of your brain that sees the car on the other side of the street creeping over the double yellow lines and says to you, “Hey, if the car keeps coming, it is going to hit you. Let’s slow down and move over.” When you are at work and your boss mispronounces your name in a meeting and you want to jump up, scream the correct pronunciation, and then write it out phonetically on the white board...,your prefrontal cortex is what shows you the firing that would be in your future and helps you stay seated and nod along and plan to calmly let your boss know the correct pronunciation of your name later.

That isn’t happening with teens. They don’t forecast well—or at all in some cases. Clearly, a brain development scientist did not write the laws on drivers’ licenses! You know, like when the boys in one cabin realize they can go to the next cabin by lifting a ceiling tile and then end up falling through the ceiling of the next cabin, breaking the tiles and several of the metal grid pieces, not to mention spraining their own ankles. Then you come in and ask something like, “What were you thinking, and what did you think was going to



happen?” And they reply, “I don’t know.” or some grunted version of that. They’re actually telling the truth. They didn’t know. Their brains didn’t warn them of the lack of density of the tiles in relation to their weight or the fact that they had no idea what they would be falling on if the tiles gave way.

Teens need our help with this phenomenon. Yet this is one of the things adults often completely forget about being a teen. That causes us to leave out some of the most helpful and critical information in lessons we create. We must remember to take a few extra steps to help teens forecast and apply the lessons we’re trying to share about hypothetical or future situations.

For example, I remember being at a retreat where a small group of male youth was talking about temptation in dating relationships. The adult who was leading the group talked about how other people being around can help us with self-control and avoid the impulses that might happen when two young, hormonally charged people are alone together. After lengthy discussion about group dates and how groups can offer safety and less pressure, the adult leader said something like, “So, that’s why it isn’t the best idea to end up at home alone with your partner.” The boys looked back with complete bewilderment.

Because this group leader was a veteran and had seen the blank stares before, he followed up with, “What are some of the bad things that could happen?” Nothing. Silence. I remember sitting there, amazed that they

had not connected the dots. He said, “Well, for one thing, you could end up crossing physical boundaries you didn’t want to cross. Without anyone else around, you might not use self-control and end up doing things you aren’t ready to do.” Finally, a few nods of understanding and discussion started to appear. This adult leader offered up additional steps to help these young people forecast and get their brains into thinking about hypotheticals. Adult brains may not need this amount of priming because adults can forecast outcomes more easily. Adult brains see cause and effect more clearly than adolescent brains and can more easily forecast outcomes. Adults leading discussions with youth need to remember that forecasting for the teenage mind is difficult, if not impossible.

To communicate clearly with teens, we must include forecasting in our teaching and conversation. We can do that by simply telling them our own forecast or through leading questions like the volunteer in the story above. To give teens information and assume they will be able to imagine what that means for their life is a mistake. After all, teens have more access to information at this point in their lives than any previous generation. Teens need trusted friends and mentors to help them make sense of all the information in front of them. This includes spiritual direction and information about how to make decisions from a faithful mindset.

There are many tools to help you include forecasting as you teach creatively. You can use case-study type scenarios where you take the concept you laid out

and then describe a real-world scenario where the implications of that teaching should guide students. You can begin with a situation that students might be familiar with and ask them, “What might happen next? What could the danger be in that? Are there risks and rewards that follow this choice?” You can ask them to take an idea and create a story that shows how it affects the real world. You can ask them to create an advertisement that explains the benefit of living according to a concept. Any of these examples can work, but the key is making sure you don’t stop your teaching or mentoring conversation short of helping them forecast. Help connect the dots and get verbal responses about what youth hear and understand from your lessons.

## 03 DIFFICULTY WITH METAPHOR

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ARMED WITH THE KNOWLEDGE OF THE DIFFICULTY OF THE TEEN BRAIN IN FORECASTING OUTCOMES, IT BECOMES EASY TO SEE THIS RELATED CHALLENGE: TEENAGERS' LIMITED ABILITY TO UNDERSTAND METAPHOR.

In case it has been a while since language arts class, metaphors compare two different things directly. (For example, Simon-Peter is the rock upon which Jesus will build the church. Peter is not literally a rock...,but he and a rock share characteristics that invite us to think more deeply about who Peter is as a person and how Jesus sees him as a disciple.) One of the key abilities to be unlocked during adolescence is the ability to comprehend metaphor. It's why you can tell five-year-olds that the sunset is made of cotton candy, and the five-year-olds will laugh and ask if they can taste some of it, but when you say it to a group of college students, they simply smile at the comparison and the delicious colors as they stare at the sky.

Many of your youth listen to the pastor's sermon with visible confusion. Heck...many of your youth listen to your messages with visible confusion too! It's why Jesus being a rock who rolls our blues away is only truly appreciated by church leaders forty years of age and up.



(Thank you, Larry Norman, and that spiral-bound book of [“cool songs that weren’t quite hymns with the fish on the teal/brown cover”](#) that every youth room and camp had from 1975–2002.)

The ability to comprehend metaphor is progressive, meaning that the older we get and the more practice we have, the more deeply we can make meaning from metaphor. This fact makes language like this even more complicated to use in teaching teens. The chemicals released in the adolescent brain unlock the ability to understand metaphor, but it takes time for that ability to fully develop. The older they get, the easier it is for them to make that jump on their own.

A real problem, for those of us who teach teens, is that a LOT of what we are talking about is very abstract. Complicating this problem is the fact that a LOT of the Bible uses metaphor to bridge the gap between the divine and the worldly. That means we must be intentional about spelling things out, so students don’t get lost along the way. It’s part of our job to help students develop this ability to take meaning from metaphor so that when they read that the “kingdom of God is like a mustard seed” or that “they are the bride of Christ,” they don’t give up reading the Bible out of sheer confusion.

Let’s say you are teaching a small group, using the biblical metaphor of students being a “light” in their world by practicing their faith. You need to explain what that means and not assume students understand

it. The younger the students are in the group you are communicating with, the slower you will need to go, stepping them through the metaphor and the more times you will need to recall the basic ideas undergirding the metaphor.

Doing this work can also help you clarify what you are trying to say as well. For example, if you are teaching kids to “be a light,” what are you meaning, particularly if you are using Psalm 119:105? (Thy word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path. See!? Metaphor everywhere.)

- A light makes darkness go away; therefore, your students should be working so that evil is less in their world?
- A light makes it easy to see obstacles and not trip over them; therefore, your students should be helping the people in their lives live better and avoid temptations?
- A light draws bugs toward it (and zaps them if it is the right kind of light!); therefore, your students should draw people closer, so that they can “bug” them until they change?
- A light makes it easy to see, so that people can go where they want to go; therefore, students should be helping their friends walk on the same path they are on?

- A light acts like a beacon for ships when it is in a lighthouse; so, are we supposed to guide others to safe harbor in the church through our behavior?

Likewise, if you are adding salt to the mix, there are many parts of the salt metaphor you could be focusing on. When you tell teens to “be salt,” (like in Matthew 5:13-16), what are you meaning?

- Salt is used as a preservative to keep things from rotting; therefore, we want our students to be part of stopping the evil in their world from growing and preserve what is good?
- Salt is used to bring out flavors that naturally occur in food; therefore, we want our students to help others be their best selves by showing them a Christian life?
- Salt adds its own spice to the world; therefore, we want our students to bring the new and good flavor of God in their lives into the world so that people who connect with them want to experience God as well?
- Salt helps different flavors in a recipe blend together into something cohesive and delicious; therefore, we want our students to use what they understand about God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit to create unity and peace in our world?
- Salts (sometimes called electrolytes in beverages)

help people remain hydrated better than purified water alone; therefore, we want our students to help satisfy the spiritual thirst of others by sharing the life-giving waters of our faith?

Each of those meanings for the metaphor produces a very different message and will imply very different outcomes (forecasts) for the students who are learning together. Be clear with your own understandings of metaphor in your teaching preparations and be clear with your church's or denomination's understandings of the biblical metaphors you teach. This, in turn, will help you be clear with your students. Our [\*Crash Courses in Youth Ministry: United Methodist Heritage & Beliefs\*](#) may be a big help on that denominational and church front!

If you looked at the examples using salt and light and thought to yourself, “Well, my lesson was supposed to teach all of those things,” understand that youth simply cannot grasp all of those different definitions in a single lesson. Because their ability to comprehend metaphor is not completely developed, pump the brakes and simplify. Do not teach a ton of concepts in a single sitting; it can't be done well. Walk students through understanding the meaning of just one of those aspects of salt or light at a time. Show them the implications that understanding can have on their personal behavior. Help them reason out the practical implications of being salt or light in their actions and how that might change them or situations they find themselves in. Focus on one interpretation per lesson. Ensure that you provide a “takeaway” that can be phrased like, “If you

remember only one thing from today, I really hope that you remember \_\_\_\_\_.”

This metaphorical issue is really the adolescent brain lacking the ability to create connections between unrelated or abstract subjects. The other place this becomes a problem is when you give an illustration from your personal life, trying to communicate an idea through that personal experience in a conversation or lesson. Just as with the metaphors, you need to create explicit connections between your story and the premise it is illustrating.

For example, you might tell a story trying to link the experience of going skydiving and the woman at the well. But unless you add the sentence, “Walking up to Jesus at that well was risky, just like when I jumped out of that plane...,” they will likely never get why you told that story (which, let’s be honest, in this case was not the best pairing anyway). Much like they will never understand your reference to Wayne’s World and the Christian punk band “Plankeye” from the 90s. Just as you would steer clear of those outdated references because they are outside of the experience of the teens in your group, you need to make sure your use of metaphor is within the range of their mental capabilities and personal experiences.

# 04 DRAMA! EMOTIONS! HOORAY!

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**BRAIN SCIENCE IS STARTING TO PROVIDE SOME ANSWERS FOR THE EMOTIONAL MOOD SWINGS THAT PARENTS DREAD AND WE WITNESS DURING THE COURSE OF YOUTH MINISTRY.**

To vastly oversimplify, the emotional components of the brain can be lumped into something called the “limbic system.” The limbic areas of the brain are important for motivation, reward, and emotion and are central in terms of the brain’s structure. The “logical system” of the brain, which we’ve explored in the *Metaphor* and *Forecast* sections of this crash course, is in the frontal area of the brain and includes the prefrontal cortex. The logical areas of the brain are important for forecasting, decision making, impulse control, and social awareness. These systems mature at different speeds, and the neural connections between these systems develop during the adolescent years.

In the teen years, the limbic system establishes new connections within the brain, and in doing so, becomes more sensitive but not more acute (or fine-tuned if you don’t like fancy vocabulary words) for several years. This may be one of the reasons for Jessie’s reaction to her mother, Lana, in our introduction. Jessie’s amygdala (the chief of the limbic system) is not yet



fully interacting with a mature prefrontal cortex, so it is easy for her to perceive emotions or threats that are not present in her mother's statement. This effect can be multiplied by the hypothalamus, another part of the brain, beginning to increase the production of different amounts of hormones that drive the maturation of the adolescent body into an adult body.

As teens enter their twenties, often the communication between the amygdala and the prefrontal cortex has been established enough that a person's ability to correctly interpret neutral, threatening, and supportive stimuli results in less unpredictable emotional responses. Why is this important in ministry? Leaders must be aware that the tone of their voice, their body posture, their word choice, and more can all hit a teenager's limbic system in unexpected ways. Some of the most effective youth leaders and educators I have ever known seem to intuitively approach and engage teenagers differently from adults, using verbal and nonverbal communication to their benefit.

Emotions and feelings are a part of everyday life. Every one of our God-given senses can trigger an emotional response. Formational and transformational discipleship experiences (reference our [\*\*\*Crash Courses in Youth Ministry: Discipleship\*\*\*](#)) often occur because of what we might call "divine effects on the head and the heart." We expect youth and leaders to have emotional experiences from worship services to Confirmation to short-term missions to retreats and everything in between. Brain science tells us that what we call "the

head” is more accurately the brain’s “logical system” and “the heart” is more accurately the brain’s “limbic system.” Emotions begin in the brain. Emotions can be strong enough to overpower logic, even in mature people. Therefore, leading any age group requires awareness of when emotions take the reins.

If you as a leader can create experiences full of positive emotional connections between an individual and his/her faith experiences, you may be a part of creating a lifelong disciple. If you can create spaces where emotions and empathy are encouraged, you may create stronger bonds between active members of your ministry, and even youth and their parents.

# CONCLUSION

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THE TEENAGE BRAIN IS AN AMAZING THING AND UNDERSTANDING IT CAN COMPLETELY TRANSFORM THE EFFECTIVENESS OF YOUR MINISTRY.

If you are looking for more information, I have a lot more in my (Jeremy Steele's) book, [\*Now that You're a Youth Leader\*](#); and if you want to deep dive on the topic, I recommend [\*Your Teenager Is Not Crazy\*](#) by Jerusha and Jeramy Clark.

The key is making sure to not assume all the teens in your group are simply younger adults with more energy than you and "adult brains." If you can keep in mind the nuances of their mental development, you can avoid confusion. You can speak truth into their minds that will give them the tools they need to navigate the stormy seas of adolescence.



# OTHER RESOURCES

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- [“Adolescence as a Sensitive Period for Spiritual Development”](#) by Marie Good and Teena Willoughby, Brock University
- [“Adolescent Brains Are Works in Progress: Here’s Why”](#) by Sarah Spinks
- [“The Brain Science Behind Why Many Youth Leadership Teams Fail”](#) by Jeremy Steele
- [Understanding Teenage Brains](#) by Mark Oestricher
- [“Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging of Facial Affect Recognition in Children and Adolescents”](#) by Deborah A. Yurgelun-Todd, PH.D., et al., *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* 38, no. 2 (1999): 195–99.

