

Engaging Kids in a Large Group Setting

Whether you've been in Kid's Ministry for a while or just a few weeks, you've probably noticed that a lot is required out of us as leaders when it comes to engaging our audience, kids. We have to be good communicators in one-on-one situations, in small groups, and on the stage. Most of us probably gravitate towards being one or the other. I have always preferred large group communicating from a stage, and I've really had to work hard at becoming comfortable in a small group setting. It is highly important that we learn to become good communicators in both settings. Today, I will be focusing on how to effectively communicate and engage kids from a "stage" in a large group setting. Now, some of you may have an actual, physical "stage" in your kids' ministry environments, and others might not. If you don't, that's ok! You don't need to have a physical stage for these tips to be applicable to your ministry. Moving forward, when I use the term "stage" it is considered the front of the room, or the area from which you teach in a large group setting. I believe these tips and concepts should be helpful to both Lead Kid's Pastors/Directors and anyone on the stage team in your ministry. I have used this training with my stage team.

It Takes a Team

Speaking of stage teams, you need one! You might be starting off with "me, myself, and I," and many of us have been there, but you can't stay in a singular state forever. You're bound to burn yourself out being a one man/woman show, and the kids will likely get bored of hearing the same person all the time. You need to start raising up and training a team of diverse leaders to tag-team the large group elements of your service. Nothing makes me more thankful for my team than when I have to do an entire service by myself. It is exhausting! It may seem like pulling teeth to train your leaders on how to effectively communicate with the kids from the stage, but you will be so glad you did.

Enter with a Bang

When you enter the stage, bring the energy level you want to see from the kids. You can't come out on the stage with your energy level low and expect the kids to wake you up. The leaders on the stage set the energy level for the room. I have heard leaders complain about how the kids are "dead" or have no energy, especially in service that are earlier in the day. I've found that if you keep bringing the higher energy level on the stage, the kids' energy level will rise to meet yours.

Before you begin explaining the service element you are leading, always introduce yourself by telling the kids your name and position. For example: "Hey guys! I'm Pastor Corinne and I'm so excited to share today's game with you." We should always think about stage communication from the perspective of a guest or newer kids who have no idea who we are or what is going on. Introducing yourself also adds a personal element to an otherwise impersonal moment. Take this concept to the next level by making an effort to learn the kids names and use them when you are calling on them from the stage. Have you ever seen a kid's face light up when you use their name? It only takes small gestures like knowing a kid's name to have a huge impact on them.

Know what you are planning on doing or saying *before* you get on the stage. Some people may be more comfortable with “winging it” than others, but the kids can tell when you have absolutely no idea what’s going on. If you’re distracted because you are under-prepared or holding a piece of paper in your hand, it will be nearly impossible for you to effectively engage the kids. It’s also important to know what’s coming up next on the schedule and who is leading it. Sometimes that person is in the bathroom, home sick, putting a bandaid on a kid’s finger, or they weren’t paying attention. If you are leading on the stage, it is your responsibility to keep the service going and engage the kids. This can be a bigger issue as your stage team becomes larger and includes more leaders.

If you have access to microphones in your ministry, use them! This may seem like common sense, but I have met some leaders who have a phobia of holding a microphone. If you are in a large room with more than ten children, a microphone is a resource you need to keep control of your audience. Always speak into the microphone if you are on the stage. If you call on a kid or use volunteers during your service, allow them to speak in the microphone as well. It is impossible to engage the entire audience in the moment on the stage if they can’t hear what’s going on.

Make it Interactive

If we just stand on a stage and talk at the children for an hour, we will lose the majority of their attention. Not only will they not be engaged in what we are teaching them, but they will likely leave our services having learned nothing new because they checked out in the first five minutes. We always want to keep the kids’ attention so we can teach them something new and exciting about God’s Word.

Kids love questions! Ask lots of questions during every stage element to confirm the kids are still listening. Questions can be for the whole audience requiring an action in response. For example, “raise your hand or jump up out of your chair if you know last week’s memory verse.”. Questions can also allow individual kids to have the opportunity to contribute to the learning experience. For example, ask “who can remind us of the five books of the Bible we learned about last week”? Sometimes, these opportunities to interact can cause kids’ answers to derail your service and send you down an unwanted bunny trail with their lengthy stories. The stage leader should always know when and how to nicely and swiftly shut down an answer that is getting off track.

If you feel like you are losing the kids’ attention, you can always re-engage them with a repeat after me statement. You can use this technique with just about anything. For example, during announcements, you can have the kids repeat the date of an event, or during the message, you can have the kids repeat the main character’s name every time you say it. Take it to the next level by getting kids out of their seats and adding motions to a “repeat after me” statement. This will engage multiple senses and get everyone to refocus on what is happening on the stage.

Any time you are using the Bible, make it interactive! Get the kids involved and engaged in God's Word individually. You might be thinking "Most of my kids forget their Bibles at home and never bring them to church." I have definitely experienced this frustrating problem, but my team came up with a great solution! We purchased some affordable Bibles in a translation that is kid-friendly (we prefer NIV and NLT) and created the Bible Bin. The Bible Bin is quite literally a bin full of Bibles that we provide for the kids to borrow during the service if they forgot their Bibles at home. We still encourage the kids to bring their own Bibles, and if a kid doesn't own a Bible at all, we will give them a brand new Bible to take home. Once you have your own Bible Bin in place, there is no excuse for any of the kids to be disengaged during the message or any other time you are using a Bible during the service. You can even do an old-fashioned sword drill and have the kids race to find the weekly memory verse. Before beginning the message, we always tell the kids the passage in the Bible and allow time for them to turn to the passage with us before continuing on with the message. It is so important to use the Bible from the stage and have the kids individually dig into it with you every week.

Team and individual incentives/competitions are great ways to engage the kids from the stage. We have done boys vs. girls, colors, and grades. I have found that seating the kids by their ages or grades is the best way to engage them and helps them form relationships with kids their own age. You can engage the kids by offering points, bucks, candy, or prizes to individuals or teams that are participating. Following the rules/expectations, and answering questions about what they have been taught are great ways to earn incentives. Switch up your incentives and competitions to keep the kids excited and interested in achieving their goals.

Know how to read your audience from the stage. Are the kids bored, talking, fidgeting, moving around, misbehaving, or constantly asking to go to the bathroom? It may be time to wrap up whatever you are doing or change your method to get more time out of their attention spans. You can change up your method of teaching by showing a video clip, playing a game, or doing an object lesson. Every time you switch up your method, you will reengage the kids' attention.

Tricky Transitions

Transitions are so small and seemingly harmless, but they can be super tricky to master. Again, the more people there are on your stage team, the trickier it will be to nail your transitions. A good rule of thumb is that the stage should never be "dead". A dead stage means that no one is on the stage, no one is speaking, and there is not a video playing. It only takes about 5 seconds of dead stage time to lose the kids' attention. A leader should always be walking on the stage immediately after another leader leaves the stage. If the next leader is not ready to go, the leader who is on the stage should stall by lengthening the current service item or move on to the next scheduled item without them. Quick and seamless transitions are essential to keeping the kids engaged in your services. You can use video bumpers to make transitions easier for your stage team and keep the stage from becoming dead during a transition.

Prepare, Prepare, Prepare

I know you and your stage team are busy. Everyone's heard the excuses for why a volunteer hasn't looked at the service schedule until the moment they walked on the stage. I have a rule

for myself and my stage team that I stick to: You should never be holding a schedule or curriculum in your hand on the stage. This might seem like an impossible rule for you to enforce, but you will see a huge difference in how your stage team engages with the kids when their faces aren't buried in a sheet of paper.

There are some ways to cheat on this without losing engagement with the kids. You can use a confidence monitor or screen in the back of the room to help with knowing what to say or what is up next. You can use a cart or stand on the stage for messages and have your notes on the stand. Resist the urge to hide behind the cart and have your eyes glued to your notes! You can hold a Bible in your hand and read from it. Sneak a cheat sheet in your Bible with your outline and mark your scriptures to find them quickly. I always remind my leaders that it is more important to connect with the kids and make eye contact with them, than to say everything exactly as it is written on the page.

Connect with Kids Offstage

If you really want to engage the kids on the stage, a good place to start is building relationships with the kids offstage. If a leader is not on the stage, they should always be sitting with kids, participating, worshipping, and interacting with them. Leaders should not be hanging out in the back of the room or chatting with other leaders during service. I have no idea why leaders always seem to gravitate towards standing or sitting in the back of the room unless you train them to do otherwise. You can't lead from behind! Zig Ziglar said, "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." When we show the kids that we are genuinely interested in spending time with them and hearing about their lives off the stage, they will be more likely to listen to us when we are speaking to them on the stage.

I have never run a perfect kid's service, but I am always working towards a higher level of excellence because the kids deserve it and God has entrusted me with teaching them. I hope these tips will help you as a leader or give you some ideas for your next leader training.