

55 Ways to Love Your Students

It's Not Enough to Tell Your Students You Care – You've Got to Show Them!

You have come to the end of your D-Group and you decide to close with a heart-felt word of encouragement. "Well, I want you all to know that I am praying for you this week. I care about you and I love you guys."

Students who were placid just moments before suddenly erupt. A girl to your right begins to cry. Angry and frustrated faces surround you. It's clear that you unintentionally touched an emotional and sensitive nerve!

Finally, another student breaks the tension by saying, "Yeah, right! That's what a few other youth coaches had told us in the past – but we haven't seen them in months! Care about us? Love us? You don't even know us! How do we know that you're not any different from the others who said the same thing and then stopped showing up?"

Your bluff has been called! And so now you're faced with something we like to call, "Put Up or Shut Up" time! And here are 55 ways to "Put Up!"

1. **Remember names.** Few things leave a more lasting impression on students than your ability to call them by name. (Especially with a ministry our size.)
2. **Meet them on their turf.** Don't expect them to always come to you. And don't trick yourself in to thinking that seeing them at church is always enough to build rapport with your students.
3. **Send birthday cards.** Who do young people get cards from? Immediate family, extended relatives and close friends. Why not add your name to that list?
4. **Invite them along.** "Never go anywhere alone," advises youth ministry legend Les Christie. Asking someone to join you confirms their worth to you. And it's a great chance to share informally and to role model the Christian life!

5. **Be in touch.** How many students suffered through another week without positive physical contact? I guarantee that it's more than you think. Expressions as simple as a hand on the shoulder, a high-five, or even a pat on the back can prove your concern and care.
6. **Respond to absences.** Many young people drop out when they feel unneeded or unimportant. When you follow up with them, it communicates their value to you and the group.
7. **Forgive & forget.** *"Love keeps no record of wrongs."* (1 Corinthians 13:5). If you model authentic forgiveness, it will give your students the courage to do the same.
8. **Recognize their accomplishments.** Look for opportunities to applaud your students. Spread the word to family and friends that you want to know about this inside information.
9. **Write them encouraging notes.** Students love to get mail, so send them brief postcards or letters or emails. Express your confidence in them and reaffirm your availability. *(Through my time in youth ministry, this is one of the most effective tools I've ever used!)*
10. **Offer support when needed.** You're never more needed than when your students face tough times. When they face unexpected troubles, your active concern can impact them for a lifetime.
11. **Recognize personality changes.** Abrupt shifts in normal behavior patterns may be signals for help. Don't hesitate to share your concern with your students.
12. **Follow up prayer requests.** Ask for progress reports on prayer needs. This reminds your students that you take their spiritual life seriously and helps them recognize God's provision.
13. **Use the telephone and e-mail.** How often do you phone your students or drop them an unexpected e-mail for no reason? Call them just to say "Hey!"
14. **Go to their "natural habitat."** Show up for lunch one day and just look at the reaction on their faces. Then you'll see the true significance of this point!
15. **Open your home.** Occasionally ask your students to join you at home apart from regular programming and group activities.

16. **Confront in love.** Authentic concern sometimes says, "I care for you too much to let that continue." Your willingness to deal with tough issues reveals the true nature of your commitment. (Hebrews 12:5-11)
17. **Listen.** You don't need all the right answers, just two good ears! Empower your students to talk through their problems with someone they can trust.
18. **Answer questions.** Young people have difficulty interpreting the mixed messages they receive. If they ask, it's because they trust you. Don't be afraid to respond honestly.
19. **Say, "I love you!"** These words can never be said enough or too often. Say them personally, sincerely and genuinely.
20. **Affirm spiritual growth.** Everyone can use a spiritual "pat on the back." Commend Godly character you observe.
21. **"Unwrap" students' giftedness.** When you detect unique talents or abilities in your students, give them the encouragement and opportunity to explore those gifts.
22. **Expect the best.** Young people will settle to your level of expectation – so aim high! II Corinthians 13:11 says, *"Aim for perfection."*
23. **Accept them as they are.** Students are surrounded with transitions (physical, emotional, intellectual, maturity, etc...). And because of these transitions they can either act really mature, or insanely immature! Be patient with them!!! God's not finished with them (or for you, for that matter).
24. **Focus on their interests.** Investigate your group members' hobbies and ask for pointers. They'll be happy to oblige, and you'll gain new insights into them.
25. **Be available.** Inform your students that you're accessible when they need you (remember to tell them when you're not available too). You have lost an opportunity if they weather their storms alone.
26. **Laugh together.** Don't be so serious that you miss humorous moments. Don't be afraid to fake fall from time to time! 😊
27. **Cultivate students' opinions.** Invite honest feedback and keep an open mind. God may want your young people to teach you something.

28. **Be real.** Your students hunger for relationships with people who have the confidence to be themselves.
29. **Be a “soft touch.”** When you can participate in your students’ fund-raisers. To avoid poverty, I try to purchase from only the first student who asks me to.
30. **Speak first.** Initiating conversations can be difficult for shy or new students. Make them feel important by speaking to them first.
31. **Give positive reinforcement.** Some students are lightning rods for criticism. So look for something praiseworthy in every one of them.
32. **Keep confidences.** Develop a reputation as someone who’s reliable with confidential information. Nothing is more destructive to your credibility than breaking trust. *But keep in mind, what CAN be kept confidential and what CANNOT be kept confidential.*
33. **Share “good news!”** When a group member makes the news, mail them the clippings. Even if their parents already have a supply for the relatives, they’ll appreciate your thoughtfulness.
34. **Seek sanctuary.** Your group studies should not be a battle ground for personal disputes. Place high priority and regard on emotional security and acceptance of everyone.
35. **Be dependable.** Have you ever challenged a student to attend a program and then not been there yourself? How’s your track record for consistency? If you’re reliable in the small things you’ll be rewarded with greater confidence. (Matthew 25:14-28)
36. **Be a servant.** Greatness, as Jesus demonstrated, is expressed through service. Your group will reflect this truth to the extent they observe it in you! (Matthew 10:24-25)
37. **Send postcards.** When you travel, mail postcards about your trip to your students. Let them know that even though you are away, they are on your mind.
38. **Smile.** Your smile expresses openness and approachability.

39. **Watch your tone of voice.** Clear communication is made up of the words we choose and how we express them. Take care that your tone reflects concern, encouragement, and support.
40. **Be attentive.** It's frustrating to talk with someone whose actions demonstrate they're not interested. Make sure your body language reflects attentiveness.
41. **Support through prayer.** Select two or three D-Group members to pray every week. Inform them in advance and ask for special needs or requests.
42. **Maintain eye contact.** Sounds silly I'm sure, but the eyes are a window to the soul. So let your students see your compassion in your eyes.
43. **Watch your words.** Real affection is often exercised through what we determine not to say. Your careless remarks could leave stinging scars. Avoid heavy sarcasm.
44. **Display students' pictures.** Ask each D-Group member for a school picture. Hang these on your fridge at home so they can see it if they come over to the house.
45. **Give students respect.** This is what we like to call a "boomerang principle" – give and you will receive in return.
46. **Take them seriously.** Any problem, no matter how trivial it may seem to you, is your students' biggest concern at the moment. Don't brush it off and let them feel that their issues are too petty for you.
47. **Admit your mistakes.** Don't be fooled people. We're usually the last to acknowledge what others already know.
48. **Avoid church/school conflicts.** Arbitrary scheduling that forces students to choose between church and school activities is absolutely unfair!
49. **Foster teamwork.** Serving alongside together, down in the trenches, definitely builds camaraderie.
50. **Invest your time in them.** There's no substitute for just hanging out and being together. This life-to-life interaction is the essence of true discipleship.

51. **Smooth “rough” edges.** Do you have students who lack social skills or need help with personal hygiene? It’s awkward and sometimes hard to do, but that’s what friends are for. (Just be wise on how you confront this one!)
52. **Be a model and example for them during church.** Whether it is during Fusion, Octane, or Sunday service, understand that their eyes are on you and learning from the example you set.
53. **Empathize.** Empathy is, “feeling your pain in my heart.” Is this how Jesus expressed His love for us? (Philippians 2:6-7) Remember what it was like to be a kid.
54. **Play together.** You cannot, Cannot, CANNOT forget that they are still Students!!! Allow yourselves to have fun playing together.
55. **Resist favoritism.** If pressed, you’d admit feeling “closer” to some students than others. But be mindful of everyone in your group. Budget time and attention to everyone equally.