

# Framing Youth

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## **PRE-LESSON INFORMATION**

### **SESSION DESCRIPTION:**

Society's views and stereotypes of youth are based primarily on myths. Unfortunately, many of our ministry practices are influenced by these myths. This session will uncover some of the myths that cause us to frame our young people negatively and will offer practical ways to help you and your congregation to begin framing youth as children of God who have gifts to share and calls to live.

### **LEARNING OUTCOMES:**

1. Participants will become aware of the source of our stereotypes of young people and how these frameworks limit our ministry.
2. Participants will be presented a theological framework for understanding young people and our ministry with them.
3. Participants will be able to help others in their congregations begin thinking about young people through this new framework.

### **MATERIALS NEEDED:**

1. History of Adolescence Video
2. Handout: "Called Agents" Descriptions
3. Handout: Bibliography
4. History of Adolescence Video Text

### **OVERVIEW OF LESSON:**

This lesson will help participants critically examine how our assumptions about children and youth influence our ministry with them.

## LESSON PLAN

### 1. **Stereotypes** - 5 minutes

- a. Have the participants identify as many stereotypes of young people as possible in 1 minute.
- b. List all the stereotypes on the board as a large group.
- c. Discussion
  - i. Are these true?
  - ii. Are they true of all young people all the time?
  - iii. Why do we still hold on to these if they aren't true?
  - iv. What is the origin(s) of these stereotypes?

### 2. **Framing Young People as Undeveloped Consumers** - 15 minutes

- a. A 5-minute video introducing the participants to the historical emergence of adolescence as a life-stage. You can either play the video or use the attached History of Adolescence Video Text. Introduce the video by saying: "In this video, we will hear a brief synopsis of the historical development of this life-stage we call 'adolescence'. By learning this historical development we will see how many of these stereotypes have emerged and why they are dangerous."
- b. Discussion after the video (10 minutes)
  - i. Draw a box on a sheet of newsprint, chalkboard or whiteboard that is big enough to write inside. On the outside of each side of the box write the following words: *Undeveloped, Identity-Less, Self-Centered, and Consumer*. Explain that this is the Undeveloped Consumer framework.
  - ii. Have the participants partner up and discuss where they see the "residue" of this *Undeveloped Consumer* framework in their congregation's ministry with young people. Give them a few minutes to discuss this with their partner, and then ask the group to share what they discussed with their partners.
  - iii. Discuss as a large group: How does this frame limit our ministry with young people? Summarize their ideas inside the box you drew.

### 3. **Framing Young People as Called Agents** - 25 minutes

- a. Break into 4 small groups (10 minutes)
  - i. Give each group a description of *Called, Child of God, Relational, or Agent*. This description will include scripture or a theological text that supports this claim. It will include a 1-paragraph description of this characteristic. And it will include a case study or example of what it looks like.

- ii. Have each small group discuss these two questions pertaining to their assigned characteristic. Why is it important for us to think of each young person as (*Called by God, Child of God, Relational, Agent*)? How would our ministry with young people look different if we took this seriously?
- b. Large Group (15 minutes)
- i. Have small groups report back to large group, summarizing their answers to these two questions. Have 4 large sheets of paper in front of participants and summarize each group's summary of their assigned characteristic for the whole group to see.
  - ii. Draw new box on board and frame it with the words *Called, Child of God, Relational, and Agent*. Ask the large group to discuss how this framework would shape or change our ministry with young people?

#### 4. **Applying a new Frame** - 10 minutes

- a. Have the following questions posted in front of the participants. Give them a few minutes in silence to process and reflect on these questions in writing on their own. Then ask them to share their thoughts on 1 of these questions with a partner. Then bring the whole group together and ask for a couple reflections on each question.
- i. Current Success: How is your congregation's ministry with young people already working from this "Called Agent" framework?
  - ii. Growth Area: What is one change your congregation desperately needs to make to move closer towards this "Called Agent" framework?
  - iii. Strategy: What is one thing you can do right away to start making this change? Where do you expected to experience resistance? Embrace?

#### 5. **Prayer** - 5 minutes

- a. Return to the list of stereotypes from the beginning of this workshop. Open the time of prayer and then invite participants to speak out loud words that directly challenge the negative stereotypes listed. Ask that God's spirit continues to open our eyes to the called and gifted nature of our youth and that we might help our young people live into this called nature.



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## History of Adolescence Video Text

In this video I want to give you a really brief overview of the historical emergence of the life-stage we call adolescence.

Prior to the 20<sup>th</sup> century you were either a child or an adult. There was no in between. If you were strong enough to help provide for your family or bear children, then you were considered an adult. If you weren't able to do these things, then you were a child.

In 1904 G. Stanley Hall became known as the first child psychologist when he published a book called *Adolescence: Its Psychology and its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion, and Education*. This book was the first of its kind to bracket the teen-age years as a unique phase of life that is neither childhood nor adulthood. It birthed the idea of adolescence as a time of storm and stress and raging hormones. Hall's prescription was something called "moratorium" which meant that adolescents should not be burdened with too much responsibility. Rather they should be given open space to "sow their wild oats" otherwise they would not arrive at adulthood with the fervor they would need to become contributing citizens. Hall's theories have all but been debunked, but their residue still lingers in our culture's views of youth and practices of youth work.

But there were some other things going on at the same time.

In her book, *Act Your Age!*, Dr. Nancy Lesko identifies three massive cultural anxieties that were prevalent in American society at the same time Hall was developing his theory of adolescence. These included anxiety around race relations, gender roles and nation building. Lesko's claim is that our society's anxiety about these three issues merged with Hall's theory causing our entire culture to focus all of its anxieties and hopes for the future onto those in this phase of life called "adolescence". So we immediately began sending them mixed messages as we simultaneously believed they were to not be burdened with adult responsibilities AND yet they were also to solve our nation's biggest social issues.

At the same time, the U.S. government was debating Child Labor Laws. The National Child Labor Committee was formed the same year Hall's book was published. Their goal was to eliminate all children from the work force. It wasn't until 1938 when the Fair Labor Standards Act was passed and nearly all forms of child labor became illegal. Up until this point children worked side-by-side with adults, but now the work world was off limits to youth.

The Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 might not have passed if it wasn't for the Great Depression of the 1930's. The National Child Labor Committee wanted children removed from

the workplace for their own safety but the depression made their removal a necessity for the large number of unemployed adult men as well.

High School attendance was not yet the norm, so many young people were out of work but were not necessarily in school. This changed in the 1930's. In 1930 less than ½ of American teenagers were attending high school. By 1940 approximately 2/3 of them were attending. The percentage of teens attending high school continued to increase during the 1940's as the high school became the normal experience of the American teen.

This combination of Hall's misinformed theories, societal anxieties, labor laws, the depression and compulsory education created the perfect storm that birthed what we now call "youth culture". This first youth culture is on full display in the movie, Grease. For the first time in history teens were listening to different music than adults, dressing differently than adults, and spending their time differently than adults. Upstart companies in America's post-war economic boom saw this youth culture as a prime target market and so began the corporate world's preying upon our young. From the 1950's onward you cannot separate youth culture from the culture of mass media and marketing.

You can see in this quick review of history that adolescence is more of a culturally constructed and defined reality than it is a biological necessity. This historical emergence of adolescence as a unique life phase has left us with a very skewed framework that warps our perspective of young people. For the sake of this lesson, I'd like to call this perspective the Undeveloped Consumer framework. It grows out of this history as causes us to see our youth primarily as undeveloped, identity-less, self-centered, consumers.

We view them as being undeveloped in that we do not believe they are yet able to contribute to society in any positive way.

We view them as being identity-less in that we falsely assume they do not yet know themselves as children of God.

We view them as being primarily self-centered and unable to take into consideration another's desires or aspirations.

And we view them primarily as consumers for whom we must produce and provide products and programs in order to keep them satisfied and loyal.

If you take a moment to think critically about your congregation's ministry with children and youth, you will start to see the fingerprints of this Undeveloped Consumer framework on most

of what you do. It is my hope that this lesson will help us all be honest and critical about the way we frame our youth and how this frame limits our ministry with them.

## **CALLED**

*Now the word of the Lord came to me saying, 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.' Then I said, 'Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.' But the Lord said to me, 'Do not say, "I am only a boy"; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord.' Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the Lord said to me, 'Now I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.'* (Jeremiah 1:4-10)

### **What does it mean to be Called?**

We make the bold claim that everyone has a call from God to serve their neighbor in their daily lives. We do this through our relationships – neighbor, classmate, teammate, son, daughter, partner, spouse, coworker, etc. To be called means we are set free to partner with God in the healing of the world for the sake of the world, not as a means to earn God's favor. Our young people have this call NOW, it is not something they have to wait for adulthood to live.

### **How is this different from the Undeveloped Consumer?**

The Undeveloped Consumer is not told that she has a call to live out God's mission right now. She is led to believe that she is not yet fully developed and, therefore, she cannot contribute in a meaningful way until she enters adulthood and develops the maturity and expertise needed to actually be a contributing member of society. How could she possibly have a call or anything to offer if she is not yet fully human?

### **What does this look like?**

Miriam is a 16 year old who cares deeply about God's creation and believes she has a special responsibility to protect it and help (challenge!) others to protect it as well. Every Sunday night at her church, an intergenerational community of children, youth and adults gather for a dinner prior to small groups and worship. One week Miriam pointed out how disappointed she is by the use of disposable plates, cups and silverware for these dinners. Every week the church would add 1-2 large garbage bags to the landfill. Miriam asked if they could switch to using the real dishes, glasses and silverware from the church kitchen and have a different small group spend their small group time in the kitchen washing dishes after the meal. Everyone agreed this would be a good idea and individuals began to report dishwashing as their favorite experience

in their small groups. Miriam's sense of call to protect creation changed the culture of her congregation.

**Questions for Discussion**

1. Why is it important for us to think of each young person as Called by God?
2. How would our ministry with young people look different if we took this seriously?



## CHILD OF GOD

*“We are born children of a fallen humanity; by water and the Holy Spirit we are reborn children of God and made members of the church, the body of Christ.”*  
(Liturgy of Holy Baptism, ELW)

### **What does it mean to be a Child of God?**

The grace of God frees us from our bondage to fallen humanity and frees us to live as Children of God. Being a Child of God means that we are adopted into the community of the church and grafted into the body of Christ. We are not in search of an identity. We are not identity-less. Our identity is given to us as God draws near and claims us. We forget this reality and it is the call of the church to remind one another of this truth. We are called to become who we already are, Children of God.

### **How is this different from the Undeveloped Consumer?**

The Undeveloped Consumer is a mindless consumer in search of an identity that he believes he must achieve through consuming products or achieving the right type of success. For him identity is an achievement, not a gift. Unfortunately, for many youth, identity understood this way becomes the most elusive achievement of all. Our dominant understanding of young people is that the task of “finding” or “achieving” one’s identity is the primary task of adolescence. Yet we believe our identity is a gift given to us by our Creator.

### **What does this look like?**

Zak woke up one morning and realized that all of his clothes had brand names plastered across them. He spent a lot of money to purchase these clothes and had become a walking billboard for these brands. He thought it was strange that he was paying money to do their work of advertising. He was also becoming more and more aware of how the brands students wore often determined their social status at the high school, or vice versa. He learned to sew and now sews patches over all of the brands on his clothes, or cuts the tags off. He also only shops at thrift stores. He doesn’t want to be known for the brands he does or does not wear. He wants to be known for who he truly is.

### **Questions for Discussion**

1. Why is it important for us to think of each young person as a Child of God?
2. How would our ministry with young people look different if we took this seriously?

## RELATIONAL

*“Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.’ So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.”*

(Genesis 1:26-27)

### **What does it mean to be Relational?**

We were created in the image of a relational, triune God. Therefore, we have been created for relationships. Multiple disciplines (linguistics, sociology, psychology, theology, philosophy, etc.) agree that a subject’s identity and sense of meaning is defined by the relationships in which it finds itself. This does not mean that we all must be the extroverted life of the party. It simply means that we come to know ourselves fully when we are deeply connected to other people.

### **How is this different from the Undeveloped Consumer?**

The Undeveloped Consumer does not need to be deeply connected to other people. She only has to live up to the low expectations we place upon our teens. We expect them to be self-centered. We expect them to only care about themselves. We assume this to be normal adolescent behavior and it sells our youth short. When they live up to those low expectations they find themselves to be lost and without meaning. When they experience relational connections they find themselves alive and invigorated. Why do you think bible camp is such a powerful experience for young people? It is because they are woven into an intentional relational fabric for an entire week. And that is exactly what we were created for!

### **What does this look like?**

Jacquie has always felt like a loner. She is socially awkward and she knows this gets in the way of her being able to develop friendships. She often feels as though no one understands her. One weekend she volunteered with her church to spend an evening at a local homeless shelter serving a meal and playing games. She was pretty sure she was going to hate it and that the homeless people would smell funny and wouldn’t even be able to carry on a conversation. Jacquie starts to come to life as she retells the story. She was too nervous to engage the residents of the shelter, so she found a place to sit and eat by herself until 3 residents come over and asked if they could sit with her. They introduced themselves, asked her questions, told her jokes, and laughed at her jokes. Jacquie had a great night and says she can’t remember

laughing so hard. She experienced a connection with these people. She encountered their humanity and they encountered her humanity. She says, “You know what the best part was? They got me. They really GOT me!”

**Questions for Discussion**

1. Why is it important for us to think of each young person as primarily Relational?
2. How would our ministry with young people look different if we took this seriously?

## AGENT

*“Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. **To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.**” (1 Corinthians 12:4-7)*

### **What does it mean to be an Agent?**

Agency means power. Our young people are gifted by God’s spirit to serve the common good. They each have gifts and skills and power to help the Christian community serve God’s world. We do them a disservice when we assume that they have nothing significant to offer until they are “officially” adults. Unfortunately most young people believe that they have no power or they believe adults are not willing to share power with them. With God’s call and with God’s spirit comes great power and agency.

### **How is this different from the Undeveloped Consumer?**

The Undeveloped Consumer has no agency. Essentially we don’t want him to think for himself or exercise his individuality. We want him to “fall in line” and passively consume whatever it is we are trying to sell him - whether it is fashion, body image, or church membership. A culture driven by consumption wants non-thinking consumers with no power to continue to mindlessly say, do and think what we want them to say, do and think in order to maintain our status quo. The Undeveloped Consumer doesn’t rock the boat. If he chooses not to consume or is unable to consume, then he is labeled “disposable” by society according to Henry Giroux. Our culture doesn’t seem to want young people to have any power or agency.

### **What does this look like?**

In August of 2012 a cat was gruesomely burned and staked to a tree in a South Minneapolis park next to a picture of President Obama. News agencies covered the story as the security threat that it was. But there was another part of this story. A young neighborhood boy named Spencer organized a prayer vigil in the park for the cat and for the park. The next day he and his friends gathered to decorate the sidewalk that



surrounded the park with chalk drawings of cats and poems about why they love cats and why they love their park. Spencer was an agent with power to lead his neighborhood in reclaiming and redeeming a public park from a gruesome act.

**Questions for Discussion**

1. Why is it important for us to think of each young person as an Agent?
2. How would our ministry with young people look different if we took this seriously?

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

The following texts are recommended readings for expanding your ability to think critically about the effects of our narrow views and low expectations of young people (the Undeveloped Consumer) and the promise of ministry shaped by the Called Agent framework of children and youth.

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