

Qualities of a Good Advisor

Advisors must be at least twenty-five years old to participate in youth events organized by the UUA, and most districts and congregations have a similar policy. This has been the practice in youth programs for decades because it helps clarify the different roles of youth and adults, and ensures that advisors have appropriate distance for their own youth experiences.

Whether an advisor is twenty-five or forty-five, age is less important than how comfortable an advisor is as an adult. Advisors must be comfortable exercising authority and leadership within a youth group when it is called for, but they should not need authority and leadership roles to enhance their own self image. Nor should advisors feel that they have to mirror the values and behaviors of youth in order to be liked. The integrity with which advisors articulate and act upon their own belief system is much more important. Advisors are models, not mirrors. The last thing youth want to see in an advisor is a reflection of themselves.

Advisors must also be aware of their own gender, racial, ethnic, and sexual/affective orientation identities. In particular, it's important to be aware of the social dynamics associated with those identities. Given the call for youth ministry to include multicultural competence, advisors should receive training in these areas. Youth will be looking for mentors in this work and will need strong advisors to join them in exploring how marginalization works in our youth groups, our congregations, and society at large.

Advisors must maintain clear boundaries between themselves and youth, and sexual and emotional boundaries are paramount. Romantic/sexual relationships between advisors and youth are emotionally damaging, usually illegal, and unacceptable under any circumstances. Neither should advisors look to youth to meet their emotional needs. Just as it is appropriate for youth to look to their peers in the youth group for support with personal issues, advisors should look to their own peers for this kind of personal support.

A good youth advisor:

- Is fun, helpful, eclectic, sensitive, nurturing, drug-free, vulnerable, accessible, courageous, responsible, comfortable, a good listener, honest, flexible, genuine, interesting, neither invasive nor non-invasive, and tolerant of noise and mess
- Has a sense of humor, a great vision of Unitarian Universalism, facilitation skills, a strong sense of personal worth, an answering machine, and a solid sense of their own sexual identity
- Brings munchies
- Leads with a participatory style
- Sets personal limits
- Works well with others
- Helps make youth events succeed
- Wants to be an advisor
- Likes and respects kids as people

A youth advisor should not:

- Be untrustworthy, uncommitted, a gossip, condescending, undependable, needy, a couch potato, judgmental, opinionated, controlling, immature, a lecturer, without a vision, inflexible, negative, abusive, flaky, rude, or lazy
- Have unresolved issues from their own adolescent years, a private agenda out of synch with UU values, boundary issues, or a parental attitude
- Try to practice therapy on the group

Being a good youth advisor means being genuine with youth. This is difficult for many adults, who have often developed personas for effectively dealing with the world. In a youth group, youth are actively struggling to answer questions of how to be. They will challenge you to be vulnerable and real. You can help them see what it's like to be responsible, caring, and involved. You can show them by example what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist and to live out our values in day-to-day life. The youth you are advising are surrounded by adults who relate to them in the context of specific roles - parents, teachers, and other authority figures. You are giving them an opportunity to know at least one adult just as a person.