

Starting a Youth Group

There is no one-size fits-all approach to starting a new youth group. Each congregation's needs, history and expectations will be different. This document, appropriate for lay, professional and youth leaders, will help guide you through some of the foundational questions and decisions involved in starting a group.

Who is involved?

The idea for a youth group could originate anywhere! Sometimes, the youth ask for it themselves. Other times, a parent wants to put together a group for their own child. Sometimes a religious educator or minister suggests it.

Regardless of who raises the issue, all of these parties are stakeholders. The rest of the questions that follow about how a group might run or what its purpose is are questions that concern youth, parents, religious educators, ministers, and adults in the congregation. Groups created for youth without their input lack buy-in. Groups created by youth and a few adults without congregational involvement lack support. Being intentional about including all these voices from the beginning helps you create a group that is supported and desired.



What do we want? What do we need?

Starting a youth group is often the default answer to the question "what can we do for youth?" While youth groups are great, really understanding what has prompted the desire to start one can help shape what the group becomes, or determine if it is, in fact, the best answer to your congregation's needs.

Be sure to make a distinction between what the youth want and what the adults want for the youth. Both are valuable and important in this process, but they are different things. You may determine at the end of this conversation that what all the groups in your congregation want is more like a structured small group ministry for youth that runs concurrently with the adult small groups, or that the youth really want a structured program that looks more like a religious education class.

Who is youth group for?

In 2009, the national Youth Ministry Working Group recommended that youth programming within the Unitarian Universalist Association serve high-school aged youth, meaning those in grades 9-12, or the equivalent for homeschooled youth. Many congregations and districts use this range for their youth programming. Some other congregations, because of their size, generally combine some programming for middle school youth and high school youth, and separate for particular age specific programs. In addition to a youth group, you may still have structured religious education programs for middle schoolers. If you are struggling to find programming for this age range, contact the UUA's Resource Development Office at religiouseducation@uua.org.

Ultimately, the program that will meet your needs will be specific to your situation. Talk it through with all the stakeholders. Some things to keep in mind: how will you have meaningful experiences for both twelve-year olds and eighteen-year olds if you combine the middle and high school age ranges? Can you sustain two separate programs? If you have two separate groups, at what point does someone transition from one to the other? Some groups allow 9th graders to choose whether to stay with the middle school group or join the high school group, though they are not permitted to do both.



One option for marking the transition point between age ranges is the completion of Coming of Age (COA), whether at the end of 8th grade or the end of 9th, after which a youth can join the youth group. The Coming of Age-based transition is often coupled with the Our Whole Lives (OWL) sexuality education curriculum for 7th-9th grades. Many congregations find that the combination of OWL followed by COA, alternating years, is a highly effective way of building interest and camaraderie among rising youth groups' members, though it is one that requires significant investment in time and resources.

Who supports the Youth Group?

Advisors are vital. Whether through a team of volunteers or a paid lead advisor/coordinator (who then has a team of volunteers), direct adult support is important. Some may assume that parents are the adults best positioned to serve in this capacity, but that is not always the case. It can be hard for a youth to be a part of a group where mom or dad is the adult in charge. If a parent wants to be an advisor, they need to get agreement from their child and

regularly check in to make sure it is still a mutually beneficial situation. The parent's experience as an advisor should never take precedence over the youth's experience of the group. Having multiple advisors helps avoid burnout, allows for advisors to have a week off, and offers youth several adult supports. Direct advisors to the advisor page at www.uua.org/youth for resources to help them.

In addition to the direct advisor support, be clear who in the congregation supports the youth group. Do the advisors report to the director of religious education (DRE)? To the minister? Some congregations will put together a youth/adult committee where adults from the congregation, youth from the youth group, and other stakeholders (religious educators, for example) come together to discuss and make decisions about the youth ministry in the congregation.

When / Where will we meet?

When to meet can often be the most difficult decision to make when starting a youth group. Again, making sure all the stakeholders are involved is important here. The youth may want to meet on Sunday evenings, but if their parents aren't willing to drive them or your youth can't drive themselves then attendance may be low. Below are some of the common meeting times, along with considerations for each.



Before / After service: Allows families to only make one drive per week to church, though non-youth/non-advisor drivers need to come early/stay late. May encourage youth attendance at service, but may also feel too long. Allows youth to participate as part of the music team, worship team, greeter team, etc.

During the week: Evening meetings can run longer, allowing for movie nights, in-depth discussions and more. Doesn't conflict with Sunday service or other activities. May be difficult to find a common night that works for all, given sports teams, school clubs and homework.

Sunday evening: May be easier for schedules, though youth may express the need to do the homework that hasn't been finished yet. May require families to leave and then return.

During service: Youth have group while adults are in service and children have religious education (RE) classes, and it only requires one drive for families. However, youth and advisors don't get to attend the Sunday service.. Youth in group can't be part of the music team, worship team, RE teaching team, etc. Group time limited by service time. Keeps youth in an RE structure instead of encouraging them to be part of the wider congregation.

In general, the Office of Youth and Young Adult Ministries does not recommend youth groups always meet during a Sunday service. Over time, this arrangement deprives youth of the opportunity of experiencing the congregation alongside the adult members and can contribute to the isolation of the youth group. Obviously your youth will not attend every Sunday service no matter what your youth group meeting time, just as most adults will not attend every Sunday service, but preserving the chance for your youth and advisors to attend Sunday service at least some of the time can benefit the youth, the advisors and all members of the congregation.

Alternative ideas to try: Does your congregation have any mid-week activities? Make the youth group part of that set and then families can attend together and head to their separate activities. If you do service/RE on Sunday morning, can you leave the youth room open with adult volunteers between service and youth group for youth to stay and do homework?



The question of where to meet will depend largely on your congregation. You should always begin by what is available in terms of meeting space there. Youth group is part of the congregation and shouldn't be separated. Meeting in advisor's homes is strongly discouraged. Ideally, your congregation has a room that can be designated solely as youth space, which can allow the youth group to decorate it and feel a sense of ownership.

What will we do? How will we lead? And other pressing questions

The answers to these questions are completely up to you. Here are some resources available to help you through these steps:

Balanced Programming

- **The Six Pillars of Balanced Youth Ministry** – available at www.uua.org/youth
- **The Web of Youth Ministry** – available at www.uua.org/youth

Leadership/Governance Models

Available from the UUA Bookstore, *Youth Ministry Advising: A Complete Guide* expands on potential governing models for your youth group. These are: advisor-led, group-led, elected leadership and youth/adult committee.

I have more questions!

Continue to explore www.uua.org/youth for more resources and support. Pick up a copy of *Youth Ministry Advising: A Complete Guide* for guidance on programming ideas, curricular resources, youth development, safety and boundaries, and more.

