



## REMEMBER

- Remind yourself that their behaviour is saying something about what is going on inside them, not something about you. Resist speaking out of hurt or embarrassment. Choose to respond rather than react.
- When feelings are high, thinking is low—in both of you. Choose a time when feelings have calmed down to discuss heated situations. Don't try to get them to unpack the situation in the moment - just deal firmly and kindly with the behaviour. Invite them into a later separate conversation about their feelings.
- Often time and maturity are your two biggest allies but neither can be applied to the situation that is before you. In the meantime, be patient, support parents, look for the image of God stamped on them, and don't let them push you out of their lives.



## RECOGNIZE

- “Acting out” refers to unrestrained actions in a young person. In short, it means he/she is behaving in a way that is disruptive and potentially harmful to themselves and others. You might see things like excessive risk-taking, bullying, melting down, obstructing a program, or loudly heckling a leader.
- Acting out can also be a way to indirectly disclose thoughts and feelings teens don't know how to process. It feels like it relieves stress but it's only a temporary fix and can cause greater stress because of the consequences.
- Young people act out for many different reasons. It might be about attention, uncertainty, power, revenge (against parents/authority), feelings of inadequacy, boredom, desire for peer approval, past trauma, or stress.
- Trying to identify motivations helps us know what needs they are trying to fill with this behaviour so we can respond to that rather than simply react.
  - Eg. a youth who feels powerlessness, might try to take power away from others; a youth feeling inadequate may be trying to distract people from their perceived flaws. Understanding the goal can help us feel compassion despite the behaviour and address what is really going on.



## RESPOND

- **Create a connection.** If the behaviour is disruptive in your setting, intentionally get to know the young person outside of that space. In your setting, don't make every conversation about their behaviour. Work at "catching them" not misbehaving and express appreciation for that.
- **Don't create a confrontation.** Avoid addressing their behaviour in front of others if possible. Image is probably important to them and we have no desire to leave them feeling humiliated. Bow out of power struggles because they will always result in a no win situation.
- **Be honest with them.** Tell them about how their behaviour impacts you. Explain that it confuses you because it doesn't fit with the assets you have seen evidence of in them. Ask questions that genuinely seek to understand how they see their behaviour.
- **Work together.** Create a list of appropriate expectations for behaviour in your context and their suggestions on how to respond when lines you have drawn together get crossed. Decide together on a plan of action.
- **Ask yourself.** Is this behaviour simply part of adolescent impulsivity or is it an attempt to communicate something? Does it show up in every setting or just here? Am I upset because of how it makes me look or because it's harming them? What are they gaining and what are they losing? How does Jesus see them and have I told them?
- **Ask them.** What story do they think their behaviour is telling people about them? Is that story true? Is there another, more positive story you have seen that might be true as well? What would change in their life if they and others began to believe that other story?
- **Find places of legitimate contribution.** There are things they have to offer you and your program. Find the good works they were created to do and invite them in. Tell them and those around them about the assets you see in them.



# ACTING OUT

lifeteams  
resources



## RESOURCES

[teenagewhisperer.co.uk](http://teenagewhisperer.co.uk) - Blogs and resources for living and working with troubled teens.

[joshshipp.com/acting-out](http://joshshipp.com/acting-out) - An informative video about how to handle youth who are acting out.

[www.cyc-net.org](http://www.cyc-net.org) - Search “aggression” for an excellent guide to helpful and compassionate responses to acting out youth.

[helpguide.org](http://helpguide.org) - Search “troubled teens” for help with recognizing troubled teens vs typical teens.