



NEW ENGLAND YEARLY MEETING OF FRIENDS QUAKERS

What We Learned: Takeaways for Friends Involved in Youth Ministry (Children and Teens)

Offer coaching to the adults in your meeting about how best to welcome children and teens. Most adults that we surveyed said that they felt children and teens were welcome in their meeting but that *they themselves* were not skilled in doing the welcoming.

Pay close attention to the physical environment and online presence of your meeting. New youth and their parents often recognize a vibrant, multiage meeting by things they can see within the first few moments of their first visit to your meetinghouse or website. Does a sign outside the building specify that children are welcome? Does your website and other promotional materials include information about what's offered for families, children, and teens? Are children and teens genuinely accepted in worship, and are there places in the worship room for small children to sit? Do children receive their own welcome from whomever is greeting at the door? Are adults, teens, and children all interacting with one another, including across family lines? Is there a diaper-changing table? Is there a designated space for children and another designated space for teens? Can you see that children have had an influence in decorating the physical environment of the meeting?

Bring all ages together for worship. Many meetings involved in the partner project tried occasional multigenerational worship, with children present for the entire hour. Providing quiet materials, like crayons and paper, coloring mandalas, picture books, pipe cleaners, or Wikki Stix, can create an outlet for energy while leaving space for contemplation and listening inwardly. Most of the meetings also asked someone to tell a story, such as a Bible story or a Quaker story¹, at the beginning of the hour. All of the meetings that tried community worship decided to continue it, in most cases about once a month. They put time and care into preparing the meeting for all-ages worship, so that expectations were clear and understood. Their efforts were rewarded with experiences of grounded worship all together.

Find ways to talk and teach about the experience of unprogrammed worship with Friends of all ages. New Quakers self-report learning a lot about how meetings for business and committees work in their first three years as Friends, but they don't self-report learning how to participate in meetings for worship. While the actual experience of worship is central, opportunities to explore worship in *other* ways—discussion, reading, facilitated activities—seem to be important.

¹ <https://www.fgcquaker.org/faith-and-play>

Work to balance time in age-specific spaces and time in all-age spaces, since both are valuable. Age-specific spaces (when people can be with other people of similar ages) are excellent for leadership development and for life-stage-specific spiritual formation. But age-specific spaces don't do a good job of nurturing lifelong commitment and belonging within the Religious Society of Friends. For that, everyone needs a chance to access worship, social time, and work/service time alongside Friends of all ages.

Gather everyone for play. Don't limit all-ages gatherings to worship. Find times together for play and connection such as potlucks, celebrations, game nights, movie nights, hikes, museum visits, and Christmas pageants or performances.

Talk with youth about spiritual gifts. Friends of all ages feel more welcome, engaged, and supported when their spiritual gifts are recognized—even informally—in meaningful ways. To feel comfortable in recognizing gifts this way, Friends need opportunities to better understand the concept of spiritual gifts and to practice exploring their own gifts and the gifts of others. This is also a reason to lift up examples of Quaker witness in history and today: to share models of Friends identifying and sharing their spiritual gifts.

Take time to talk explicitly about how Quaker faith influences people's actions in daily lives. Children and teens, when surveyed, say that their faith influences their actions in daily life much less than adults say it does. When you make very explicit connections between spiritual practices and home, school, or friendship situations, you can help children and teens learn that it's possible to be guided by their faith—and practice this.

Seek opportunities for intergenerational conversations, especially based in personal experiences. When we surveyed 265 Friends of all ages, we discovered that children and teens seem to believe that while young people sometimes struggle in their meetings, *adults* are always super comfortable—that adults have no trouble feeling welcome and knowing everyone and participating. But adults reported that they actually have quite a lot of trouble with these things. Chances for open, structured conversation between generations will help bridge this gap and offer a chance for each age range to learn from the other.