



CONNECTING WITH Kids

Use the
Kidologist's
insider secrets
to make
life-changing
connections
with kids

by Karl Bastian

No child has ever thanked me for that great vacation Bible school we did three years ago or for the awesome Water War event. Instead, children remember our trips to restaurants, the times I came to watch them play soccer in the rain, the birthday parties I attended, or the miniature golf outings we had.

It's the little things that matter to kids. And if we're really going to make a lasting impact on children, we need to do more than just teach them or program for them. There are too many young people with heads full of Bible facts who aren't living for the Lord. Somehow, we need to make a connection with them that transcends, is deeper than, and makes relevant the things that we teach them.

What does it mean to connect with kids? What does that connection look like? What does it sound like? What must you do to become a genuine kid connector? Follow these four steps.

It's not enough to use kid stuff as props in your teaching; you must own things that you enjoy and kids can relate to.

1 Develop a Child's Perspective

The first step toward a highly relational ministry style that'll make real connections with kids takes place without any children. It starts in your head and heart. If you're to make connections with kids, you must learn to see and understand the world as they do. You must carry with you an invisible pair of "kid glasses" that you can put on at any time to help you see the world as kids see it. You may even find you like the view and decide to keep it permanently! No one will notice except the children around you.

Rediscover the wonder of everything around you. Unleash your imagination. Play. Be curious. Reach out and touch stuff. Be silly sometimes. Kids will recognize that you're one of them and fail to notice that you're 3 feet taller. My favorite compliment from kids is that I'm a kid in a grown-up's body. I know, and they know, that we understand a world that most adults have forgotten.

2 Find Things in Common

Think about who your friends are. Why are they your friends? What is it that connects you? Most likely you have something in common such as work, hobbies, sports, or your family situations. If having things in common is how and why you connect with adults, why wouldn't the same be true for connecting with children? It's not enough to use kid stuff as props in your teaching; you must own things that you enjoy and kids can relate to. Show kids your Happy Meal toy collection. Or play soccer with kids before church. Find ways to get on their level by being part of their world.

Great resources are all around you to help you discover kids' world. Check out the "Read All About It" box on page 77 to get Children's Ministry Magazine associate editor Carmen Kamrath's recommendations.

Close Encounters of the Presidential Kind

I was heading to chapel, when suddenly walking right at my side was Dr. Joseph M. Stowell III, the president of Moody Bible Institute. I was a new student, and I'd never been that close to him. After my meager hello, he greeted me. We had a simple and short conversation walking down the hall toward chapel until I turned to go to my seat and he walked up to the platform.

Weeks later when I stepped into an elevator, there was Dr. Stowell again. I greeted him, and he answered, "How's it going, Karl?" He had remembered my name!

While I was valet parking at a popular Chicago restaurant months later, Dr. Stowell drove in. I left a note inside his car inviting him out to a meal sometime. A few days later, my phone rang in my dorm room, and my surprised roommate said it was the president's office. I had an appointment with the president!

I took Dr. Stowell out for breakfast. My memories of that meal are very special. Our conversation was full of fun and laughter, and at the end, I received a personal challenge from my new friend. I now cherish the Bible where he wrote a personal note and signed his name.

Because of the way my president responded to me, I never felt like just one of the 1,400 students at Moody Bible Institute. I had a personal connection with the president. Years later, when I had the privilege of introducing him to preach at my church, I said to the congregation, "To you he is Dr. Joseph M. Stowell, president of Moody. To me, he is Joe."

As the years went by, I discovered that many of my fellow students had their "Joe stories"—stories of meals and conversations and other meaningful impressions he had made on their lives. I discovered I wasn't alone.

Did this diminish my special feeling? No, it made me admire him more. When I reflected on the impact that my special relationship with Joe had on my studies, my relationship with God, and my future aspirations to ministry, I made up my mind that I'd strive to be a Joe Stowell to every child in my ministry. I determined that I never wanted any child in my ministry to feel like just another kid in the audience. I want each one to have a special connection with me.

I may not be the president of a college, but I'm their children's pastor. Sure, as they get older, they may start to discover that many kids had a special relationship with me, but each will be unique and different, and none will take away from another. In fact, the special relationships will build on and reinforce each other.

Karl Bastian



Engage Kids in Their World

Listen to what children talk about. Notice the subject matter and type of conversation. They'll usually discuss things from their world, engage in imaginative storytelling, or create wild "what if" scenarios. To enter into the conversation and connect, you need a key—something that proves you belong there. It may simply be your attitude. It may be a toy. Or it may be a demonstrated knowledge of the world of kids—things you can respond to when most adults wouldn't have a clue.

People often ask what to do or say to connect with kids. It's more about what you need to be. We're each different, and therefore our connections look different. Some of my portals to the world of kids, and indirectly to their hearts, are yo-yos, LEGO blocks, paper airplanes, and magic tricks. What will yours be? What'll you have in common with children? Perhaps you need to visit a toy store to buy yourself something or devote a Saturday morning to watching kids TV shows.

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Read All About It

There's no excuse for being out of touch with kids today when information about them abounds. Check out these magazines and Web sites to learn more about kids.

Magazines

- **Nickelodeon**—This magazine connected to the Nickelodeon TV channel has articles that are both serious and silly. The biggest kid-connecting benefit is the advertising in this magazine. (800-947-7052; www.nick.com)

- **Children's Ministry Magazine**—This very magazine that you're reading regularly features articles and insights about kids. Check out the "Keeping Current" section on pages 12-15. ((760) 738-0086; www.cmmag.com)

- **Girl's Life**—Geared for preteen girls, this magazine has great ads and covers entertainment and music news. (888-999-3222; www.girlslife.com)

- **Child**—Up-to-date information relating to parenting and kids today. Great statistics and updates on new products. (800-777-0222; www.child.com)

Web Sites

- **www.nick.com**—Everything you need to know about Nickelodeon TV, plus info on the hot music groups and the latest gadgets and toys for kids.

- **www.zoogdisney.com**—The scoop on Disney television and radio, with reviews and info on music groups. You can even listen to the latest tunes.

- **www.familyeducation.com**—Great information about kids that's broken down by age groups on subjects ranging from education to social development.

- **www.connectwithkids.com**—An educational site that deals with issues related to kids, such as peer pressure, prejudice, and eating disorders. This site covers topics that matter to preteen kids.

- **www.sesameworkshop.org**—This PBS site has fun games for kids, the latest toys and gadgets for younger kids, recall information, and parenting articles on topics from discipline to childhood disorders.

- **www.kids.msn.com**—This kid site has the latest in news, entertainment, games, and education. A great resource for checking out what matters to kids.

- **www.yahooligans.com**—This is a search engine that can guide you to hundreds of sites relating to kids and the things they're interested in.

- **www.sikids.com**—This online version of Sports Illustrated for Kids has information on who kids are watching in the sports world and has great polls that give insight into what matters to kids.

Carmen Kamrath

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Touch Kids' Lives Outside of Class

No matter how good a teacher you are, your mere presence in a room has limited connecting power. Children live in a world where there's always an adult in front guiding their activities. To make real connections with kids, you must impact them outside the classroom.

Even as you connect, though, never forget that it's unwise and unsafe to spend one-on-one time with children outside of church. Remember that your two-adult rule for classrooms needs to apply in outreach settings as well. Children's ministry consultant for New Re-sors-es Sharyn Spradlin agrees. She says, "I will forever be an advocate of connecting with our kids, for it's through relationship that the message will be made authentic. Our efforts, however, must be filled with wisdom beyond reproach." If you don't have two adults, then spend time with a group of children who have their parents' permission.

Do things that are unexpected. Break out of your grown-up mold. Drop by for a visit. Attend school and



sporting events as an all-out fan. Take children to a McDonald's restaurant and order a Happy Meal dinner for yourself too—and play with the toy! Visit schools, eat the cafeteria food with kids, and climb the playground equipment with them. Drop them birthday cards and notes in the mail.

Be in touch with families so you know when kids are going through tough times. These are the best times to be there for them. When kids are sick, visit them with a lab coat with your name on it (www.tafford.com) and a doctor bag filled with toy doctor equipment and candy. Leave a balloon animal or small toy. Prescribe for children to pray twice before bed and call you in the morning.

Be creative! Find out what you can do to surprise and delight your kids with the ways you reach out to them. You'll make connections that'll make your teaching take on new relevance and effectiveness. You'll not only be their teacher; you'll also be their friend.

If you do these things, you'll cease to be just another adult figure; you'll connect with kids. And aside from the results and the benefits to your ministry, it's simply a fun way to live. After all, who ever said you had to grow up? **cm**

Karl Bastian is known as the Kidologist. Check out his Web site at www.kidology.org.



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