



Exploring tough questions
facing youth today

A SPECK IN THE UNIVERSE

The Bible on Self-esteem and Peer Pressure



The Pastoral Center

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Bible-based Explorations of Issues Facing Youth

» OVERVIEW

When conversing online, the acronym IRL stands for “in real life.” The virtual world of social media, text chats, blogs, and more have the power to remove us from the real world. What we experience online can skew our perspective on what it means to be human. It can numb us, incite us, distract us, depress us, confuse us, and make us rude or impatient. Strangely, this supposedly “social” and “connected” technology can profoundly disconnect us from others.

Religious faith can also place us in a bubble, especially when it distances us from others. When we keep the prophetic message at a safe distance, obscured in theological language and abstractions, we are missing the whole point. And when we see our parish as an insider club that serves itself, we can forget the radically inclusive message entrusted to us: God’s love is for *everyone*, and God expects us to transform the *whole world* through that love.

Through the incarnation, God showed up in the real world to show us that our faith is not just about talking the talk, but also walking the walk. It can be risky. It can be confusing. It can hurt. But living out our faith can also bring us great purpose, peace, and joy.

This series connects the Bible with the tough questions that youth (and adults) encounter in their neighborhood, in school, among friends, and even online. This process will help you as a leader break open these issues in a fun and meaningful way, sparking conversation and the kind of life change Jesus invites us to embrace.

» THE ROLE OF PARENTS

As children enter middle school and high school, they become more independent, self-reliant, and, well, self-centered. This can bring parents to make assumptions that this is the time to step back, giving their child more space to form their identity. While there is truth to that at some level (adolescents definitely shouldn’t be smothered), this is a stage of life when parents should in fact *lean in*. The apparent confidence and bluster youth show on the outside can mask the insecurity and confusion on the inside. Youth need their parents to be involved more than ever.

» WHOLE FAMILY FORMATION

Parents are the primary teachers of their own children, and parishes are waking up to the fact that faith formation programs need to bring parents into the process if they hope to see faith passed on to the next generation. Recent studies give us more and more evidence that the role of parents is the most important factor in determining whether a child will embrace faith as they move toward adulthood. Research from the Center for the Applied Research on the Apostolate shows that parents who talk about their faith and show through their actions that their faith is important to them are more likely to have children who remain Catholic.

More about Whole Family Formation >>>

To learn more about how your parish can take a comprehensive whole family approach to faith formation, visit GrowingUpCatholic.com.



While whole family events with elementary-aged children are on the rise, the role of parents can be an afterthought in youth ministry. We have designed the sessions in this series to work with or without parents present, and we encourage you to offer them as parent-child events.

If you choose to involve parents, it is important to consider before each session how to best do so. Many of the activities in this series are high-energy, creative, or silly. Some parents may need some encouragement to get out of their heads and have fun with the group. A few activities involving physical contact would be inappropriate for parents and youth to participate together, and we have noted them as such.

There are a number of ways to approach discussions with parent participation. Unless you have a small group, you will likely want to break into smaller groups for conversation. Some youth may be self-conscious and unable to be completely honest and open in a group situation with a parent present. For this reason, you may choose in some cases to assign parents to different groups from their own children, or to have separate parent and child groups altogether. Be sure to cover expectations around confidentiality. It is inappropriate for a parent (or youth) to share with another parent what their child said in a small group.

Note that even if parents and their children do not share all conversations together in the session, they will still have a valuable shared experience and can have extended conversations about it later.

>> **THANK YOU**

The role you play in gathering, animating, praying with, and forming youth is a valuable one. Thank you for all you do to serve the church and its families!

Bible-based Explorations of Issues Facing Youth

» A SPECK IN THE UNIVERSE «««

The Bible on Self-esteem and Peer Pressure

» INTRODUCTION

We are next to nothing in the grand scheme of the universe—just specks. In the breadth of space and time, we humans barely merit a glance. Yet in all this vastness, our God chose *humans* for a special relationship, and loved us through life, death, and back into life. Why would the great Creator of the universe do such a thing? Maybe there's something to us after all.

Self-esteem generally means that a person's worth comes from within. For believers, there is another, more important element: Our significance is rooted in being creatures of our awesome Creator and we, too, are proclaimed "good." It is not only who we are inside that gives us significance, it is "whose" we are—God's children.

Some speak of self-esteem in terms of high and low. How about seeing it as healthy and unhealthy? A person's self-esteem can be built up by telling them they are great, or they did a wonderful job; just as easily their esteem can take a hit by informing them they are stupid or clumsy. Healthy self-esteem can be nurtured by giving *both* praise and critique—the added ingredient is information. Let others know *why* you feel they did a good job, *why* they are wonderful people. Critique is easier to take and more productive when accompanied with care and concern for the individual. Take time to evaluate *why* something didn't turn out so well. Information helps a person decide how they will behave and respond in the future, giving them self-control and thus boosting self-esteem.

Self-esteem also hinges on who a young person sees in the mirror. Society today sends a lot of different messages, many defining what we need to be "somebody" and who we should be. God has a different message. This unit aims to help you get that message across. Building healthy self-esteem is about teaching people the skills to deal with life, reassuring them that they have innate worth endowed by their Creator, that they are loved, that they have a place in the new community of grace. Then, when rough times come, they don't destroy the individual.

But of course, the church isn't the only entity preaching a place to belong. Teens experience intense pressure from peers; often at this age, their friends have as much or more influence on them than their families. But pressure's also been around a long time. With this unit, you and your participants will study stories of biblical characters who faced some incredible pressure. Each time God was faithful, and in turn called believers to be faithful, even in the midst of self-

» EXTENDER SESSION

Extender sessions suggest special activities related to the issue of the unit. They help accommodate the diversity of parish schedules. Since each unit is undated, youth may study units in their entirety and still participate in special events of the parish that get scheduled simultaneously with youth group time. Extender sessions can be used anytime, but the one for this unit best follows **Session 1**. Calculate now whether or not you will be using the extender session.



doubt and the pressures of a changing world. In our faithfulness as creatures of the Creator, we find our self-worth and gain strength not only against the onslaught of society's pressures, but can even turn our confidence to helping others along those rocky paths—that's positive peer pressure!



THE TEACHING PLAN: The parts of the session guide

» **Faith story.** The session is rooted in this Bible passage.

» **Faith focus.** This is the story of the passage in a nutshell.

» **Session goal.** The entire session is built around this goal. What changes—in knowledge, attitude, and/or action—do you desire in your group?

» **Materials needed and advance preparation.** This is what you will need if the session is to go smoothly. You'll feel more at ease if you've taken care of these details before you meet your group.

» FROM LIFE TO BIBLE TO LIFE

The teaching plan we use is called *life-centered*. However, when we write each session, we always begin with Scripture. We ask, what does this particular passage say, especially to youth? Each session moves from life to Bible to life. So the Bible is really at the center of this way of teaching.

In every session we try to hit upon a tough question that participants might ask. Find out what questions on this issue are important for your group. Feel free to bring your own input and invite your group members to add their own experiences.

» TEACHING THE SESSION

The five step-by-step movements will carry you from *life to the Bible and back to life*. Each session takes about 45 to 50 minutes. If there is a handout sheet for the session, take note of any complementary activities and stories.

1. **Focus.** This activity is intended to create a friendly climate within the group and to draw attention to the issue.

2. **Connect.** Talking, drawing, role playing, and other activities invite participants to express their own life experience about the issue. Also use memory, reason, or imagination to get the group thinking about *why* they view the issue the way they do.

3. **Explore the Bible.** With a minimum of lecturing, dig into the faith story and search for answers to questions raised in the first activities. The

Insights from Scripture section will help clarify the faith story. Help participants discover how the faith community understands the Bible passage.

4. **Apply** the faith story. This is the "aha!" moment when participants realize the faith story has wisdom for their lives.

5. **Respond.** What will the group do about the issue in light of what they have learned from their own experiences set alongside the faith story? At this point, the faith story becomes lived rather than a mere intellectual exercise.

» LOOK AHEAD

Here are reminders for what you need to do for the next session or two.

» **INSIGHTS FROM SCRIPTURE**

Here is a resource for Explore the Bible. Don't try to use all the material given. Take what you need to lead the session and answer questions your group may have. Let the Insights section inspire you to think and study more about the passage for the session.

» **HANDOUT SHEETS**

Occasionally, there will be a handout sheet to complement your session. If you choose to use this, you will need to make enough copies for the group. These sheets may include questions, stories, agree/disagree exercises, charts, pictures, and other materials to stimulate your group to think and discuss.

Generally, no participant preparation is required unless the session plan calls for you to contact selected group members for specific tasks.

SAMPLE - DO NOT REPRODUCE

SAMPLE - DO NOT REPRODUCE

»» SESSION 1

A CROWN OF HONOR »»

»» KEY VERSES

What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor. (Psalm 8:4-5)

»» FAITH STORY

Psalm 8

»» FAITH FOCUS

God created the heavens and the earth, and trusted human beings with the care of the world. Out of the expanse of the universe, God chose people—us—for relationship. Therefore, we must have great worth. Our significance is rooted in being creatures of our awesome Creator and we, too, are proclaimed “good.” It is not only who we are that gives us significance, it is “whose” we are—God’s children.

»» SESSION GOAL

Since youth often struggle with identity and a sense of self-worth, help them see how, though we are mere specks in the universe, we are created “very good,” worthy to be here, and are intimately connected to the Creator who made such an amazing universe.

»» Materials needed and advance preparation

- Solar system chart (see Focus for how to prepare it)
- Two pounds (or about 200) M&M’s or other edible tidbits, divided into two bowls of 100 each (*Option C, Focus*)
- Copies of handout sheet for Session 1
- Pencils/Pens
- Bibles
- Newsprint/markers or chalk/chalkboard
- Writing paper, enough for one sheet per person



TEACHING PLAN

1. FOCUS 10-12 minutes

Prepare a solar system chart for Focus Option B or D: Use newsprint or tape individual sheets together, so you have one continuous piece 7’7” long (2 m, 28 cm). **Note:** You could put a tape measure on the floor with the planets labeled. One inch (2.5 centimeters) from the left end make a dot about the size of a penny. Label it with a big #1. Then place dots at the following distances from the outside of this first dot and number them (use large, legible numbers):



LOOK AHEAD

For the next session, when you study Zacchaeus (a man short on self-esteem), you'll need a ladder for one of the options in Explore. Also round up some songbooks. Instruments are optional.



Feet/inches		Centimeters/meters
#2 - 1"	Mercury	2.5 cm
#3 - 2"	Venus	5 cm
#4 - 3"	Earth	7.5 cm
#5 - 4.75"	Mars	12.2 cm
#6 - 1'4"	Jupiter	41 cm
#7 - 2'4"	Saturn	71.5 cm
#8 - 4'10"	Uranus	1.5 m
#9 - 7'7"	Neptune	2 m, 38 cm

Hang this on a straight wall, or lay out flat on the floor where everyone can see it. Then choose **two or more** of the following options to demonstrate the magnitude of time and space. The eventual point: In all this vast universe, people were created for a special relationship with the Creator.

» **Option A:** Say, *I want you to stare at your thumbnail for a full 10 seconds. Ready, go.* Inform them they just watched their fingernails grow 130 angstroms. On the chalkboard write "1 angstrom = one ten-millionth of a centimeter." Their fingernails grow at 13 angstroms per second!

» **Option B:** Distribute copies of the handout sheet, and have participants do "The Obvious Quiz." When they are finished go over the answers. (There is no key because the answers are obvious.)

» **Option C:** Share the following information with the group:

If this bowl of M&M's equaled the mass of the sun, how many M&M's from the other bowl would equal the total mass of all the planets and the moons that orbit them? Have participants make guesses. **Answer:** One M&M would equal the mass of the planets, moons, etc. In other words, the sun is about 100 times the mass of the rest of our solar system. Share the M&M's.

» **Option D:** Point out:

- *There is a sun which exists in our galaxy that if you put its center at the center of our sun, its surface would be located at Jupiter (about the location of dot #6 on the 8 foot/2.4 meter scale).*
- *Using the 8 foot/2.4 meter scale of our solar system, the closest star, Alpha Centauri C, would be 13 miles (20.8 km) away. The next closest star, Bernard's Star, would be over 18 miles (28.8 km) away.*
- *Scientists estimate there are about 300 billion stars in our galaxy. They estimate there are over one hundred billion other galaxies in our universe, some with less than a billion stars, some with more than a trillion.*
- *The Andromeda Nebula galaxy is visible with the naked eye from the northern hemisphere. It is 2 million light years away (that's over 6 million miles using the 8 foot scale, 9.6 million km using the 2.4 m scale).*
- *If a star is 4 light years away, like Alpha Centauri C, then the light we see from it is 4 years old.*

2. CONNECT 5 minutes

Discuss the following questions:

- *What are your thoughts right now in regard to the size of our universe?*
- *In the scheme of the universe, how big are you?*
- *On an 8 foot/2.4 m scale, how many angstroms are you?*

- Which best describes how you feel related to the size of the universe:

1. Smaller than a hair on a gnat's head
2. Less than sweat on an ameba
3. Lower than a dust atom on the belly of a snake in a wheel rut
4. Insignificant as a moisture molecule on the brow of a flea

Shift to the next activity by saying: *Our universe is a huge place. Its size is staggering. Yet out of the expanse of the universe, God chose people—us—for relationship. Therefore, we must have great worth. Where do we fit into the scheme of things?*

3. EXPLORE THE BIBLE 10 minutes

Read Psalm 8:3-8. Then discuss:

- Where has God placed us in the order of creation?
- What responsibilities has God given people?
- Why do you think God has trusted us with so much?

4. APPLY 10 minutes

Using the chalkboard, have participants list adjectives that describe God (loving, powerful, gracious, generous, forgiving, intimate, etc.). Now go through this list and have group members identify the things created in humans that reflect these attributes of God. Then discuss:

- You know the creation stories in Genesis tell us people are created in God's image. How does being created in God's image impact your feelings about yourself?
- How do you feel now compared to how you felt earlier? Bigger than a tree? More powerful than a locomotive? Able to leap tall buildings in a single bound?
- How does being created in God's image affect your life?
- Psalm 8 says we're crowned with glory and honor, only "a little lower than God." How important are you in God's creation, in the universe?

Draw the following diagram on the board:



Explain the diagram something like this:

The outside circle of this diagram represents the behavior of a person, what we see him/her do, how they dress, how they talk, what they say, etc. Underneath the behavior are motivations; they prompt behavior. If a person feels worthwhile, you can see it in their behavior, right? Or maybe a person doesn't feel very good about themselves, so they put up a front. Their



No one is insignificant. [God] loves all of us with a special love; for him all of us are important: you are important! God counts on you for what you are, not for what you possess. In his eyes the clothes you wear or the kind of cell phone you use are of absolutely no concern. He doesn't care whether you are stylish or not; he cares about you! In his eyes, you are precious, and your value is inestimable."

Pope Francis



unhealthy self-esteem motivates them to behave a certain way. Underneath motivations are values and beliefs. They lie closer to the core of what shapes us as human beings. If you believe it is wrong to kill someone, you will be motivated to behave a certain way. At the core of a person is spiritual identity. This is where the image of God dwells. Understanding that God created you not only helps you understand who you are, but **WHOSE** you are. You **ARE** a child of God. God created us out of love, and desires a relationship with us.

5. RESPOND 10 minutes

There are times when we can really feel insignificant in the scheme of the universe. Yet we are created in the image of God. We carry a part of God in us. Now ask, *So what difference does it make if you're God's child?* Distribute paper and have participants choose one of the following:

- a. Describe, draw, sketch, etc. how they see themselves created in the image of God.
- b. Describe how being created in God's image impacts the way they see themselves.

As a group, list how this "image" affects each level of the diagram (values/beliefs, motivations, behavior). Finally, have everyone choose one thing from their list to pray for. Close in prayer, thanking God for creating us so "very good," asking for help in continuing to discover God's image in ourselves and others.



INSIGHTS FROM SCRIPTURE

How big is God? Science has helped us begin to grasp the enormity of space. Yet God is beyond space, beyond time. Then this great, beyond-thought God created the heavens and this earth, complete with day and night, water, land, and sky. After plants and animals, God created the crowning masterwork—people. All this creation God declared "very good." We are all created "good enough," with a right to be here in this world. This message, however, gets obscured with more negative ones.

The Genesis creation stories tell us that within each and every person born is God's image. Yet God is so huge, so expansive, no two people are alike. Each person carries "that of God" within. Being created in the image of God also means we are not our own. God is the one to whom we belong.

Set against the enormity of space, time, and all the wonders of earth, we can feel very small. The psalmist in Psalm 8:3-4 wonders, what could God have needed with yet one more creature? Echoing Genesis 1:28, the psalmist partly answers the question: God, for whatever mystery, needed humans to care for creation. The other part of the answer lies in God's nature. Our God is an intimate God, wishing to bestow love upon us, desiring a relationship with us. We are God's children, created to follow God.

When we look at the big picture, trying to comprehend our place in the universe, we must remember that God saw fit to create us. That we are images of such a stupendous God is where our self-worth comes from. Being God's creatures lays the foundation for all the self-esteem one could hope for.

REMEMBER WHO (AND WHOSE) YOU ARE

Youth and adults often forget their created image and get lost in a world that tries to tell them they are something else, or that they need to be a certain way to be something. Youth, especially, are torn by messages contradicting the goodness created in them. Beyond the shallow surface layer of behavior, past selfish motivations, through their values and beliefs and into their core being still lies the identity with which they were born: The image of God is central to who they are, making them a child of God. No longer is the question of “who am I?” the primary focus. The issue for all of us is “whose I am.”

SAMPLE - DO NOT REPRODUCE

The OBVIOUS Quiz



1. Dot #1 is:
 - a. really quite cute.
 - b. On our scale model the location of the sun.
2. Dot #2 is:
 - a. part human.
 - b. On our scale model the location of Mercury from the sun.
3. Dot #3 is:
 - a. all that's left of a smashed fly.
 - b. On our scale model the location of Venus from the sun.
4. Dot #4 is:
 - a. unique like a snowflake.
 - b. On our scale model the location of Earth from the sun.
5. Dot #5 is:
 - a. how big my pores are after a good workout.
 - b. On our scale model the location of Mars from the sun.
6. In our solar system, the planets revolve around:
 - a. the most conceited person in the room.
 - b. the most beautiful person in the room.
 - c. the Earth.
 - d. the sun.
7. Dot #6 is:
 - a. the size of the cavity in my back upper-left wisdom tooth.
 - b. On our scale model the location of Jupiter from the sun.
8. Light travels at:
 - a. the speed of sound.
 - b. high speeds, but I can go faster.
 - c. 186,282 miles (298,051 km) per second or over 5.88 trillion miles (9.41 trillion km) a year.
 - d. so fast you can't see it.
9. Dot #7 is:
 - a. The actual size of a black hole located in my closet.
 - b. On our scale model the location of Saturn from the sun.
10. It takes light how long to get from the sun to Earth?
 - a. Longer than it takes to get a pizza delivered.
 - b. Faster than it takes to sneeze.
 - c. Quicker than it takes me to irritate the person next to me.
 - d. Eight minutes and 20 seconds.
11. How hot is the sun on its surface?
 - a. Hotter than our teacher's car.
 - b. Hot, but not as hot as the Phoenix Suns.
 - c. Definitely hotter than the pizza we had delivered.
 - d. 9300 degrees Fahrenheit, 5149 degrees Celsius.
12. The energy released from the sun is equivalent to:
 - a. the horsepower of my car.
 - b. the energy used to light up Las Vegas.
 - c. what it takes to power my stereo.
 - d. 100 billion one-megaton hydrogen bomb going off every second.
13. Dot #8 is:
 - a. A good likeness of the mole on my left shoulder.
 - b. On our scale model the location of Uranus from the sun.
14. Even though the sun uses up 600 million metric tons of hydrogen a second, it will continue to shine at its present brightness:
 - a. not quite as long as my sister takes in the bathroom.
 - b. longer than my dad can talk.
 - c. not as long as this session will last.
 - d. 6 billion years.
15. Our galaxy is:
 - a. so big I prefer to drive from planet to planet.
 - b. 100 light years in diameter.
 - c. not as big as the Yukon and Alaska put together.
 - d. not big enough for me and my brother/sister to coexist.
16. Our solar system is traveling through space around the center of the galaxy at:
 - a. speeds you can't reach in a Chevy.
 - b. a rate which causes me to take motion sickness pills.
 - c. nothing near what I can do on my motorcycle.
 - d. 170 miles (272 km) per second.
17. At the rate listed in question 16, it will take us how long to go around the center of the galaxy once?
 - a. We should get around once before I get married.
 - b. About as long as it takes me to dry my hair.
 - c. Longer than it takes me to eat a pizza.
 - d. Over 200 million years.
18. Dot #9 is:
 - a. a figment of my imagination.
 - b. On our scale model the location of Neptune from the sun.
19. Say you wanted to travel to the star which is closest to us, Alpha Centauri C. If you traveled at the speed of light, how long would it take for you to get there?
 - a. Well, say you could travel at the speed of light, would you be able to see yourself in a mirror? If not, I don't think I want to travel to this star.
 - b. Wouldn't you go backwards in time if you traveled at the speed of light? If you did, then you would never get there because you would have traveled back to before you left. What would happen if you met yourself going?
 - c. Hey, I will go anywhere as long as it is expense paid and in the opposite direction of my parents.
 - d. It would take you over 4.3 years.