

# Recipe for Weekend-long Retreat for High-School Aged Quaker Youth

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*By kri anderson*

## **Makes one retreat, serving 5–30 youth . . .**

or more at a suggested ratio of 6–8 youth to 1 Friendly Adult Presence (FAP). (see note 1)

### **Ingredients:**

- 5–30 youth (or more) between the ages of 13 and 18 (note 2)
- Friendly Adult Presences (FAPs) in sufficient ratio
- One facility with the following elements:
  - At least one large space that comfortably fits all (preferably two—one to sleep in and one to play in)
  - Spaces adequate for small groups (6–10) to meet in
  - Two or more bathrooms (showers always preferable)
  - Kitchen and dining area
  - Outdoor area to run around/play games.
- Presenter(s) for workshop and/or facilitator(s) for discussion
- One food coordinator (note 3)
- Easel, newsprint, (lots of) markers, nametags, other supplies
- Shared expectations/guidelines, co-created by FAPs and youth
- Schedule including the following elements:
  - Structured get-to-know-you name games and ice breakers
  - Workshop/discussion time as one large group
  - Free time with structured options available—charades, cards, music, etc.
  - Structured small group time—worship sharing, discussions, etc.
  - Work group time—preparing meals, cleaning bathrooms, etc.
- One central, unifying theme for the weekend’s discussions and presentations
  - Suggested topics include, but surely are NOT limited to: art, any one of the testimonies, sexuality, violence, activism, nature, music, Quaker history.
- **Frequent** opportunities for worship—individually, among FAPs, in small and large groups.

OPTIONAL: solicit feedback via name-optional evaluation forms to learn how to improve experience in the future.

## **Preparation:**

### ***PUBLICITY:***

Because youth this age are differently aware of time and deadlines than adults, it is advisable to wait to publicize local youth events until about a month or two ahead of time. I usually alert the parents with more advanced notice, as they tend to appreciate that sort of thing, but wait until two months before the event to post/send out fliers and registration forms. This timeline is predicated on a regular schedule that the youth come to rely on, such as quarterly or bi-monthly events. This flier should include the time, date, and location of the event, as well as the theme and names of presenters, if known. Registration materials should include a medical release requesting information concerning the youth's insurance, list of current medications, allergies, dietary preferences, and emergency contact information, as well as any other information you deem relevant. The other thing to keep in mind is that teenagers these days are remarkably busy and overscheduled, so if they're already involved in something that feeds their spirit, don't take it personally. Once you've received the registrations, it's a great idea to send out a list of all who have signed up, with phone numbers and addresses, so that registrants can communicate in advance, arrange carpools, and get psyched to see everyone.

### ***FRIENDLY ADULT PRESENCES:***

Convene a meeting of the adults who have volunteered to serve as FAPs for the weekend. This can take place ahead of time, or can happen the first night of the retreat as the youth are arriving. Naturally, this can be more informal with a smaller number of FAPs, but should take place nonetheless. This meeting should review expectations or guidelines for the youth, and your expectations for the role of FAP. You should encourage adults interested in volunteering to reflect carefully on their motivations for working with youth, and to seek clearness about their intention to serve as an empowering, F/friendly adult presence. This means participating fully in the weekend's events, knowing when to step back to allow leadership to emerge from the group, and sharing themselves with the group. It is also advisable to check in daily with the FAPs during the retreat, to provide an opportunity to personally reflect on daily events, group dynamics, and schedule issues. It should be noted here that several yearly meetings have begun requesting background checks on adults who serve as FAPs, providing a level of assurance before inviting them to spend the weekend with the youth. I would submit that youth are often very astute judges of character, and can alert you to potentially inappropriate adults. Ultimately, you will need to decide what level of assurance you feel is required for your peace of mind.

### ***ACCOMMODATION:***

Connect with the host meeting or facility well ahead of time to learn of any particular idiosyncrasies or preferences about the location. Ask about expectations for the condition of the facility upon your departure, as well as the location of cleaning supplies and vacuums, and communicate these to the youth. If the retreat will be held at a meetinghouse or location unfamiliar to you, it is helpful to have a local liaison who can negotiate on your behalf. Often, meetinghouses rent space out to other groups, and coordination of who is in what space when should be worked out with plenty of time to

spare. Sometimes it is possible for a retreat to coexist with other activities in the same meetinghouse, depending on the space and noise issues. It is also a common courtesy during a weekend-long retreat for youth and adults to worship with the host meeting that First Day morning.

## **Directions:**

Blend ingredients together over a period of time roughly approximating 7–7:30pm on a Friday evening through Sunday, after worship. Provide address sheets with phone numbers and/or e-mails for youth to connect with each other outside of retreat experience. Ask for help when you need it, learn how to delegate, and breathe a lot. Pray. And have fun.

## **A brief discussion of critical schedule ingredients:**

### ***CENTRAL, UNIFYING THEME:***

This provides a shared experience for the whole group, which serves as conversation fodder and a jumping off place for community building. Teenagers can sense when there is a lack of continuity or cohesiveness, and it affects their experience of the retreat.

### ***EXPECTATIONS/GUIDELINES, CO-CREATED BY FAPS AND YOUTH:***

These retreats are an opportunity for youth to build community, take risks, and learn about themselves and each other. This is best done within a context of safety, created and maintained by shared expectations of behavior. Enforcement of these guidelines is everyone's responsibility, and creating adversarial relationships (staff vs. youth) is counter-productive to this goal. It is important to encourage the youth to identify what they need to feel safe, and to facilitate a conversation which elicits everyone's expectations.<sup>4</sup> This should happen prior to the retreat, or as one of the first activities of the weekend. There cannot be a hidden agenda nor can the FAPs dictate the rules. Co-creating the guidelines is an effective way of modeling the respect you expect to receive (and give), and empowering the youth to take ownership of their program. Once you agree to them, everyone (including the FAPs) must stick to them.

### ***STRUCTURED GET-TO-KNOW-YOU NAME GAMES AND ICE BREAKERS:***

These are an important element in creating community. There is something very powerful about saying your name in front of a group of people. These activities provide everyone (that means FAPs, too!) with an opportunity to look silly and loosen up, in preparation for taking greater emotional risks during the weekend. I recommend them even in a group where people know each other, simply because it's a good way to mark a transition into a more vulnerable, more open space for the weekend. I used to minimize the number of games I'd facilitate during a retreat, both because I didn't think of myself as a "games person" and because I wanted to focus on more "meaty" elements of the weekend. I've realized that we underestimate the importance of playing games as a way to build community. Games are the WD-40 of the retreat world.

### ***WORKSHOP/DISCUSSION TIME AS ONE LARGE GROUP:***

Again, this provides an opportunity for the youth to have a shared experience, which can serve as a jumping-off place for more personal conversation and connection. Also allows for individual members to be heard by everyone in the group.

### ***FREE TIME WITH STRUCTURED OPTIONS AVAILABLE (CHARADES, CARDS, MUSIC, ETC):***

I think we tend to grossly underrate the importance of free time. This is the time when personal connections are made, “cuddle puddles” are formed, and participants start to feel rooted in the community. It is critical, however, for some structured activities to be scheduled during free time. This is because not all youth feel comfortable just “hanging out,” and need a vehicle through which to make those connections. You can facilitate this by having cards and board games available, or by inviting youth to organize activities for the group.

### ***STRUCTURED SMALL GROUP TIME (WORSHIP SHARING, DISCUSSIONS, ETC):***

This provides another critical opportunity for connection. Many youth are overwhelmed by a whole group discussion, and only feel safe to share in smaller settings. This can serve as a microcosm of the community, to practice communication and trust, and connect at a deeper level than possible in a large group. It is also fertile ground for all varieties of leadership to emerge.

### ***WORK GROUP TIME (PREPARING MEALS, CLEANING BATHROOMS, ETC):***

This is just another opportunity to build community. Sharing work assignments offers different forms of leadership to blossom, as well as providing an opportunity for bonding and developing group morale. It is also critical for the youth to take care of the space they use, rather than having adults clean up after them.

### ***FREQUENT OPPORTUNITIES FOR WORSHIP AND WORSHIP-SHARING (INDIVIDUALLY, AMONG FAPS, IN SMALL AND LARGE GROUPS):***

Building this in serves several purposes. First, it provides an opportunity to stop, reflect, and listen. The pace of these retreats can feel quite hectic at times, simply because the energy level is often through the roof. Older youth are typically pretty good at knowing when they need to slow down, but we can all be reminded from time to time. Secondly, it grounds the retreat in our faith tradition. These retreats are not just a time to hang out. They are a venue for youth to learn about themselves and their faith community, and to make this community, and the traditions it maintains, a meaningful part of their lives. They serve a critical purpose of providing an opportunity to connect, rejuvenate, and nourish oneself; to ground oneself in the Spirit, and find the strength to go back out and witness to the world. Perhaps most importantly, they are a chance for young Friends to explore and deepen their relationship to the Religious Society of Friends, and claim their rightful place in it.

## Bon Appétit and Enjoy!

Like any great dish, there are many different recipes for putting together a Quaker teen retreat. Please see these invaluable resources for more information and thoughts, both available through QuakerBooks of FGC:

[Just Do It! How to Plan and Staff a Youth Gathering](#), by Ralph “Cookie” Caldwell and Margaret Bernstein, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, 1990.

New England Yearly Meeting’s [Youth Retreat Handbook](#), compiled by Ian Ford, 1996.

### Notes:

1. Larger retreats require clearer structure, including a fixed schedule, as well as increased program options. You will probably want to offer more than one workshop, and small group time plays a more significant role, since the gathered group is larger and making connections can be more challenging.
2. Maintaining this age limit is critical to maintaining safety and security in the group. Younger children, on average, are not developmentally ready for the level of responsibility and emotional sharing that these retreats involve. These children will often be emotionally intimidated by the older youth and have trouble sitting still for long periods of time due to their physical energy. Likewise, most older youth, especially those who have lived away from home or begun college classes, are in an entirely different developmental stage, which is incompatible with the level of structure these retreats require. These youth will resist being told what to do, creating power struggles with adult facilitators, and they hunger for a deeper level of engagement with the workshop material, which tends to alienate younger children.
3. This can be an additional staff person whose task is to prepare all meals or supervise meal preparation, or this role can be shared among staff and youth present.
4. Basics to outline in advance materials include: no alcohol, illegal drugs, sexual intimacy, weapons, or pets. Yearly meetings have different policies about smoking, which is often a controversial topic. Create a worshipful conversation around these issues with the youth and community members, developing guidelines that best reflect your discernment at that time.

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