

The Real Question: How Do We Get Youth Involved in Amateur Radio?

"I can't understand this person!" exclaimed a little girl getting on the air for the first time.

"That's because he's in Switzerland," I replied.

"Switzerland? That's awesome!" The little girl smiled from ear to ear and leaned forward to the radio. "I like this!"

There's nothing quite like the spark of interest on a child's face when they talk to someone—near or far—on HF. The smile that crosses his or her face is characteristic of all people who get on the air, whether they are young or old, licensed or not. Not only does that smile change their life, but it changes yours. Even though there are numerous benefits to getting youth involved in amateur radio, we are still not doing even a decent job in many parts of the country, or world for that matter.

So how do we get youth involved? That is not an easy question and there is no hard and true answer, but I have several tips that have helped me get youth interested, licensed, and pursuing the hobby.

The first and arguably most important step is to realize where we have gone wrong. Many times, I have seen older amateur radio operators go into schools and introduce the students to amateur radio for fifteen minutes of their school day. The problem is, the students always look glassy eyed and bored to death. What we need to do is realize that the child is a match.

We can do whatever we can to light the match, but without kindling and proper care, it will always go out and in many cases will never be able to be struck again. When we introduce amateur radio to children during the school day, there is not enough time for all twenty or so students to have their match struck. Even with the one or two matches that do get struck, many states do not allow amateur radio operators to get in contact with the students outside of school settings (not even on the air), which defeats the purpose of getting the children interested and licensed.

One of the most effective ways of getting youth licensed and involved is to get a parent, grandparent, uncle, or other family member to see the spark in the child so that they can kindle the flame that has begun to burn. This is another reason why going to schools is, in many cases, not the best strategy.

A simple way to do this is to go to a playground for a weekend and set up an HF rig. Put up a sign that says something akin to "Amateur Radio: Come ask what we are doing" and encourage parents and children to get on the air and talk to someone. Often, children will be interested and the parent will bring them over to see what is going on. If the child wants to make a contact, tell them exactly what they should say because they are new and probably nervous. As the child is making a contact, explain to the parent what is going on and write down information on how to get in touch if they want to learn more.

While this can be extremely more effective at getting youth licensed and staying in the hobby, many children just do not want to talk to people in a conversation setting and

they want a challenge. I have seen too many times where people assume that kids want to do digital so they throw out everything else when introducing the children to amateur radio. When I asked youth what interested them most, a majority of them responded that satellites were their favorite because they had to work to follow it in the sky. This can be implemented at the playground. Simply bring a satellite antenna and when a pass comes, try to make contacts. Let the child listen to a few satellite contacts before they make one, but just as with HF, tell them exactly what they should say.

Now that the match has been struck, we need to actually get the youth licensed. If a child studies for an amateur radio exam by himself, he will quickly become overwhelmed, confused, and possibly quit studying. We need to study with them and explain the concepts in terms they can understand. For example, when explaining resistance, go outside and turn on the hose. When the hose is kinked, water cannot get through, much like what happens with a resistor. If the child has trouble reading big words, read the questions out loud to them and have them study that way.

Many testing centers are able to have a VE read the questions and answer choices to the testee and the testee tells them what answer to mark. This simple process is usually effective at helping youth study and it is great for the explainer too because they can keep up with the new questions.

Now that we have gotten youth licensed, it may seem that our job is done. But it most certainly is not. We cannot judge our success on how many youth we get licensed. Rather, we must judge our success on how many youth stay active in the hobby. We need to kindle the flame and keep them involved. This is where the family member comes into play. A family member helps the child with getting on the air, setting up antennas, and helping the child find his interests in the hobby. I have seen many cases where the child did not have a family member involved with him, and in almost all cases, the parents took the radios and equipment from the child and sold them for extra cash with no say from the child about letting him keep the equipment and stay involved.

This is detrimental to the child and often causes them to drop out of the hobby and never come back. So, having a family member present to see the spark in the child helps later on to kindle the flame that was started when they first talked to someone on the air (or whenever it may have been).

I have several goals in amateur radio ranging from participating in contests; to activating rare national parks, grid squares, and DXCC entities; to participating in amateur radio club functions. But one of my biggest and furthest reaching goals in amateur radio is to get people of all ages licensed and enjoying the hobby.

I have made mistakes along the way (as anybody has), but I have come to realize what works and what does not. Everyone will have things that work for them and things that do not. So, how do we get youth licensed? Simple, we go out and strike the match through HF and satellite contacts and keep the flame burning by finding what interests them the most and helping them pursue their interests. This is not a foolproof method. There will always be exceptions, but this is the most effective way I know to get youth licensed and involved in amateur radio. So, with this information in mind, we should now proceed to go out into the world and interest youth in this amazing hobby.