

# Isn't That a Cult?

Answering parents' questions about Masonic-sponsored Youth Groups



Every so often, a member of a Masonic-sponsored youth group will invite a friend to join and be told that they can't, because "my parents say it's a cult." All Masonic-sponsored youth groups **MUST** have parental permission before a youth may join, so it's important to us that parents understand what we're about, and why we're most definitely **NOT** a cult. We hope the information in this article will be helpful to you in understanding Masonic-sponsored youth groups.

Youth groups *sponsored* by Masons are not officially *part* of the Masonic fraternity. Membership in these groups does not imply or guarantee future membership in any other Masonic-related group. Groups receive financial sponsorship, use of a meeting location, and a variety of other help from local Masonic organizations, but the groups are ultimately independent, with their own local, state and national governing bodies.

## *Why would someone think these groups are cults?*

We're not entirely sure. Unfamiliar groups with their own jargon and ways of doing things often seem strange. Different people probably have different reasons for reacting negatively to these unfamiliar practices. Some that we've encountered are:

- Lack of firsthand knowledge about the groups
- Misinformation or misunderstanding of the groups
- Mistrust of fraternal organizations in general
- A negative experience with one of the groups

... and perhaps most commonly ...

- ***Just because someone else told them they are!***

## *What is a cult?*

That answer may depend on who you ask! Some argue that almost any group's way of thinking and behaving, however extreme, is simply a matter of personal belief. Some say that calling any group a "cult" is bigotry and "intolerance." Other people are willing to define a cult as "anyone who disagrees with my point of view." A more useful definition is probably somewhere in between these two extremes.





Cults may be religious, social, philosophical, or political. Most experts agree that a cult is more than just “a different set of beliefs.” Any group with new or different ideas, especially with religious content, might be labeled a cult. The Romans considered the early Christian church to be a cult, labeled them as atheists, and accused them of horrible practices like cannibalism and infant sacrifice. Ridiculous? Of course, but the fact that Christianity was *different* from Roman belief automatically made it subject to suspicion.

Many authorities have agreed that in order for a group to be a cult, it must have some very distinctive characteristics. These usually include ***excessive control*** over members (especially through isolating them from the “outside world”) and the existence of an overly powerful ***charismatic leader***. Groups with these characteristics often do terrible damage to members’ families, and are sometimes dangerous to participants. A few that we’ve all seen in the news have become dangerous in the extreme, resulting in mass murders and/or suicides among their members.

### ***Cults exercise excessive control.***

All organizations and religions seek to influence the action and thinking of their members, which can be a very good thing. In contrast, cults exercise ***excessive levels of control*** over their followers:

- They operate by separating members from outside relationships and influences. They may even shelter members from television and other media.
- They believe that only their particular group has access to truth. (*Cult thinking is more rigid and exclusive than normal religious belief. Cult members believe that no one outside the group has the ability to understand “real truth,” or that only their leaders can correctly interpret truth.*)
- They often view themselves as “above the law of the land.”
- They have a very “Us vs. Them” mentality, and foster a spirit of suspicion and paranoia towards “outsiders” in general.
- They are extremely intolerant of other views.
- They are destructive to relationships and families. There may be a “we are your family now” attitude. Worth and validation come only from the group.
- They utilize deceptive or misleading recruitment and retention techniques.
- They demand unquestioning loyalty. Activity outside the group may be forbidden.

### ***Cults have charismatic, domineering leaders.***

One of the most characteristic traits of a cult is the existence of a ***charismatic, domineering leader*** or group of leaders. Some cult leaders, like the infamous Charles Manson (“The Manson Family”), Reverend Jim Jones (“The People’s Temple”), David Koresh (“The Branch Davidians”), and Marshall Applewhite (“Heaven’s Gate”), have drawn public attention to the cult leader “type.” There are many more who have not been so widely publicized. But they all have some traits in common:

- They are “control-freaks,” and maintain rigid control of all aspects of their group.
- They generally rule by strength, fear and sometimes even violence.
- They may claim to be divine or to have a special or unique relationship with God.
- They may claim to have supernatural powers.
- They require unquestioning loyalty, obedience and dependence.
- They may demand the sharing or surrender of the members’ property or earnings.
- They are “above” the rules of the group. Members may have to live in poverty while the leader gets wealthy on their earnings; members may be admonished to chastity while the leader engages in a promiscuous lifestyle, and so on.

It’s not difficult to see how such a leader could be very dangerous indeed.

## *So, are Masonic-sponsored youth groups cults?*

It won’t surprise you to hear that we certainly don’t think so. Why? Because Masonic-sponsored youth groups:

- Encourage members to be actively involved in their church, school, and community. *(Cults trade on isolating their members from outside influences.)*
- Place a tremendous emphasis on the importance of the family, and on your authority as a parent. *(Cults claim authority for themselves, and try to replace or supplant a member’s family.)*
- Make no claims to a unique or exclusive knowledge of truth. Members profess belief in one God, are encouraged to pursue and grow in their own family’s faith tradition. We teach religious *tolerance and respect*, which does not imply accepting or embracing the beliefs of others, but simply affirming their right to hold those beliefs. As a result, members hold a wide variety of differing beliefs, which are not dictated by the group. *(Cults look inside the group for “truth,” not to outside groups.)*
- Work cooperatively with other community groups toward common goals and worthwhile services. *(Cults operate on an “Us versus Them” mentality, not a “We and They together” mentality.)*
- Emphasize service to others through giving of our time, our talents, and our financial resources. *(Cults demand that service and investment of resources be for the benefit of the group and its leader, not for “outsiders.”)*
- Invite and encourage parents to be involved in all of their youth’s activity with the group, whether as a guest, or even as a volunteer leader. *(Cults practice deceit and “hiding,” not openness and welcoming.)*
- Encourage independent thinking, initiative, and leadership. Good team members are co-leaders, not mindless followers. *(Cults seek unquestioning obedience to a domineering leader, not fair, democratic, and cooperative leadership among their members.)*



And we could go on...

## How are Masonic-sponsored youth groups unique?

There are a number of things that set us apart. Our groups:

- Offer a program of leadership development based on high moral principles, and an emphasis on character development.
- Allow youth to develop and carry out their own program, and to learn by doing.
- Provide a varied program of activities in athletics, service, education, public speaking, and more.
- Give youth the chance to work with and learn from adult mentors and role models of all ages, backgrounds, and walks of life.
- Utilize solemn and serious ceremonies that emphasize their core values, and offer members opportunities to develop memorization and public speaking skills.
- Offer the values and fellowship of a close-knit organization, with absolutely no hazing or other negative behavior sometimes associated with other “fraternities.”
- Have a single-gender structure (separate groups for young men and young women), offering a unique learning environment rarely available to youth, while interaction among the groups allows application of the values taught in all life’s relationships.

We’re certainly different. And we’re proud of it. Sometimes being “different” is good!

## What should we as parents do?

The best answer to that is: Do what you think is best!

- We hope you’ll take some time to visit with a local group, and talk with the members and adult volunteers involved. You may find you already know some of them from your neighborhood, school, church, and community. Ask questions, express your concerns, and see for yourself. If your child joins, you’ll always be welcome to visit, and perhaps even become an advisor.
- If you belong to a church, synagogue or other religious community, you may wish to ask your leaders for their opinions of our organizations. You should certainly consider their opinions as you make your decision.
- Talk with some people you respect who belong to Masonic-related groups. Ask why they became involved.
- Make the choice that is best for your child. We realize that Masonic-sponsored youth groups aren’t for everyone. We will **absolutely** respect and abide by your decision. Your child will never be permitted to join or participate in activities without your permission.

Before deciding about your child’s involvement in a Masonic-sponsored youth group, please take the time to get a good look at who we are and what we do. We think you’ll like what you see!



For more information on Masonic-sponsored youth groups in Pennsylvania, please contact the **Pennsylvania Masonic Youth Foundation**; 1244 Bainbridge Rd; Elizabethtown, PA 17022; (800) 266-8424 (*in PA only*) or (717) 367-1536; [www.pagrandlodge.org/pmyf](http://www.pagrandlodge.org/pmyf)