

Junior High Ministry

by Mark Oestreicher

Young teens have long been dismissed as something other than real youth ministry. What an unfortunate and misguided error! By the time most students get to our youth ministries, they're already a good few years down the adolescent road; and many who grew up in church have already walked away from it. Youth worker: think! These early teen years can be some of the most powerful in all youth ministry. And there's absolutely no question that the best way to grow a strong older teen ministry is to have a healthy young teen ministry.

Junior high ministry should never be the stepchild of youth ministry. Ministry to young teens is the cutting edge of youth ministry. Older teen ministry in the last few decades has often become corrective ministry. Young teen ministry is still foundational and preventative.

A shift taking place

Various currents have brought drastic change to youth culture in the last twenty years. The age of decision making on most issues traditionally thought of as middle or late adolescent issues has continually been pushed down. Today's young teens are being asked to make all the decisions you as I made as older students. Even physiology has changed, as the age of puberty has dropped dramatically. The average age for the onset of puberty in girls was thirteen in 1970; today it is ten. We can no longer consider thirteen the beginning of the teenage years!

Young teens today are media and consumer savvy, tech literate, stressed, sexually active, experimental and experiential, and breaking away from parents but not yet connected to an identity. And they're stuck in a very strange land between childhood and adulthood.

Why Ministry to Young Teens is Powerful

Young teens are moldable. They are open to change, because everything in their lives is about change. They are just beginning the process of individuation (become their own person), and laying the ground work for the person they will be as an adult. Everything is up for grabs.

Young teens have a unique combination of relative innocence combined with a rapidly expanding worldview. Let me break that down. Young teens, for the most part, come to us innocent. Sure, many kids are already making destructive decisions before 11 (or, have had destructive things done to them); but most enter early adolescence with a reasonable amount of childlike innocence. But with puberty, early adolescents gain the new ability to think abstractly (not that they're good at it at all!). In computer terms, this change begins to upgrade their operating system. Everything they have learned, either formally or informally, must now be re-categorized, shuffled around, re-interpreted and re-evaluated.

This is a prime time to get them to marinate in the faith (practices and devotions, leading them in prayer) and to introduce them to more structured habits of prayer. As 8th graders are so active in preparing for Confirmation, this is the best time to make it happen!

Young teens are easy to build relationships with. If relationships are the cornerstone of effective ministry, then capitalize on the fact that young teens are substantially easier to build relationships with than are older teens. In order to build a relationship with a junior higher, you only have to address their question, “Do you like me?” High schoolers add to that, “Do I like you?” And college-age students add to those two, “Do I like what you stand for?”

Establish young teens into a relationship with Jesus. This is a prime age to make sure that more of a personal relationship with Jesus has begun and is taking root. Encourage them to talk to Jesus in prayer - as a friend! A defining moment for a young person, Pope St. John Paul II once wrote, is that moment in which they become convinced that Jesus is their best friend, on whom they can always count (*Crossing the Threshold of Hope*).

The parents of young teens are more involved in their lives. Let’s face it – we can only supplement what takes place in the homes of our kids. And most parents of young teens haven’t completely abdicated their role as parents yet (though some certainly have). Most want help. They want to be involved in their kids’ lives (even though many don’t know how). Not only can we offer foundational and preventative ministry to young teens, we can offer foundational and preventative ministry to families. Family ministry at the high school level often becomes increasingly difficult.

Junior highers, while often stressed out, still have less distractions than older teens. They don’t drive. Few work. They are more available to be involved in the ministry a church would provide.

What Great Junior High Ministry Looks Like

I have two axioms that we live by for junior high ministry. First, *young teens want to be treated like adults, but have the opportunity to act like children.* Understanding this concept has helped us create ministry that is appropriate to the specific needs of young teens. A paradox like this would normally be seen as a negative. But in this case, it must be seen as a positive. God made young teens the way they are, with all their weirdness!

The second axiom is this: *Quality ministry with junior highers always takes place in the context of meaningful relationships and meaningful ministry opportunities.* As I stated earlier, relationships are always the key. Any ministry that hopes to affect kids, not just entertain them, must make extensive use of a team of adult volunteers who are intentional about building meaningful relationships. Spiritual growth in young teens does not take place because of great youth talks, hot games or cool events. Growth takes place as moldable young teens intentionally model themselves after the adults who know them and care about them, and who are themselves growing in their relationships with God.

Secondly, *accelerated and permanent growth takes place as young teens learn that God can use them to impact the world.* Getting an older teen involved in doing ministry creates an appetite for more. But getting a young teen involved in doing ministry creates a way of life, a whole worldview.

Junior high ministry will always be a somewhat thankless role. Students are too caught up in their own whirlwind of change to pat you on the back. Parents are too panicked about the change in the lives of their kids to (in most cases) approach you with anything other than suspicion. And churches will continue to miss the crucial nature of young teen ministry, and promote the unspoken goal of keeping the kids under control.

But when I look at a group of junior highers I see a bunch of students who are going to be confronted with everything the world has to offer in the next 1-3 years. I know that's where God wants me to be—on the front edge of a revolution.

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