

YOUTH SPECIALTIES

*Middle School Ministry: A Comprehensive Guide to Working with Early Adolescents*  
Copyright 2009 by Mark Oestreicher and Scott Rubin

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# Middle School Ministry? Isn't It Just Baby-Sitting?

Derek was, well, a challenging kid to have in our middle school group. He was a natural leader, charismatic, good looking. And he was disruptive. Not disruptive in an “Oh, he just needs to take his medication” way, or even in a “He has all the squirrely characteristics of a young teen boy, turned to 11 on the dial” way. Derek was intentionally disruptive. His timid mom couldn't control him, and she had no idea what to do with him.



Smart and scheming, Derek would (at best) regularly manipulate entire hordes of boys and girls in our group into behaviors that would create havoc and (at worst) get everyone except Derek in trouble with their parents. If there were a group of kids hiding somewhere in a stairwell, Derek was usually the kid who got them there. If students were caught smoking or drinking, then Derek was likely the provider. If a whole section of kids were sitting with their arms crossed and “I dare you to teach me something” expressions firmly fixed on their faces, then they were almost assuredly imitating Derek.

I (Marko) chatted on the phone and met many times with both Derek and his mom. I took Derek out for sodas and meals and showed him grace and love. I tried to help his mom with her challenging role of setting boundaries for him.

While there were certainly many factors involved, the struggle, as it pertained to Derek’s disruption in our group, came down to two particularly vivid facts: He didn’t want to be there, and his mom used attendance at our group as a punishment. She revealed this to me once, with only the tiniest bit of embarrassment. When she grounded him, he simply ignored it. When she took away other privileges, he either overrode her or manipulated her into reversing her decision. The only thing she’d found that “worked” was telling Derek he had to come to our church middle school group. And since he was in trouble almost nonstop, we saw Derek fairly regularly.

I asked Derek’s mom about this approach and, more specifically, if she thought it was healthy for his spiritual development to experience church as a punishment. Her response was revealing: “I don’t know what else to do. I can’t handle him; and when I send him to you, at least I don’t have to worry about him for a few hours.”

Natalie was the youth group flirt. Her family was extremely active in our church, and she was present at everything we did. She wasn’t overtly disruptive like Derek, but she was still exceedingly disinterested in anything other than constant chatting with friends, flirting with boys, and working on her next conquest.

In many ways, Natalie wasn't that unique—we had other girls (and guys) with the same values and behaviors. What made Natalie's situation stand out was her parents' perspective. One day they sat with me in my office, very frustrated, and asked, "Why can't you do something about Natalie? Why can't you change her? What's the point of our constantly bringing her to youth group if you can't fix her?" (To be fair, I'm not sure they actually used the word *fix*; but it was implied, even if they didn't use it.)

Of course, these misconceptions and challenges aren't merely in the minds of parents.

The church board was frustrated with me because:

- a. We'd painted the middle school group's logo on the wall of our room. They'd given permission for this and even approved the design, but they didn't realize "it was going to be SO BIG."
- b. The church van had been returned, once again, with a candy wrapper behind one of the seats and a slight hint of vomit clumping to one inside corner or another.
- c. It had been discovered that we'd played Sardines (reverse hide-and-seek), and the kids had used...the sanctuary (intro ominous musical underscore).

But the final straw, and the grievance that got me called into a meeting, was that we'd used the gym (*with* all the prerequisite forms and permissions) for a large outreach event, and then used the adjoining fellowship room (without the prerequisite forms and permissions) when our attendance turned out to be larger than we'd anticipated.

I tried to tell them about the amazing event we'd had—how we'd invited a dozen smaller churches to join us, how we'd expected a few hundred young teens and ended up with close to a thousand, how kids had really connected with the speaker—but they couldn't (or wouldn't) hear it. With a passing and patronizing,

“Well, that’s nice,” they insisted it was my responsibility to “contain” the middle school ministry to the space provided for us.

(But wait! There’s more!)

How about the senior pastor who referred to young teens as “pre-people”?

Or the search committee (for a role I didn’t take) who told me they were looking for someone to create a “holding tank” for young teens during their turbulent middle school years until they could get to the high school group where lots of great stuff was happening?

Or my own proclivity, over and over again, to create programs to keep kids busy, programs to entertain (usually under the value banner of “creating a positive group image”), and programs—if I was truly honest, which I likely wasn’t—to justify my existence and our budget?

(Okay. That was fairly negative and a bit ranty. Sorry about that.)

But let’s face some facts: The gap between the perception of middle school ministry and the actual potential is a fairly universal gap. Some of this is our own doing, to be fair. But much of this gap has to do with complex cultural misunderstandings—even fear—of young teens and (let’s continue being honest) middle school ministry.

We can’t tell you how many times, over the years, we’ve been told by well-meaning church members and leaders: “God bless you for working with those kids; I sure couldn’t do it.” Or, “You must really be called to work with those kids because I can’t understand how you do it.”

The fact is, many of you reading this book feel as we do: That ministry to young teens is one of the most important and life-changing ministries in the church, an amazing opportunity

to connect young teens to Christ for a lifetime of spiritual significance (or an amazing opportunity to completely blow it in the opposite direction).

## **A Little History (Very Little, Actually)**

Focused ministry to young teens is a fairly new phenomenon in churches. And there's good reason for this. Until about the last 50 years or so, young teens weren't really considered "teens" at all.

Let's back way up. For thousands of years, in pretty much every culture around the world, children were children, and adults were adults. The line between these two worlds was clearly marked and not very wide. Children participated in family and culture at large in culturally accepted, boundaried ways, and were encouraged to look toward and aspire toward (and prepare for) the day they'd cross the line into the adult community (which was usually around age 14 or 15 for girls, and 15 or 16 for boys).

Historically, every culture had some sort of rite of passage that marked the transition from childhood to adulthood.<sup>5</sup> Rites of passage are fairly nonexistent today. Ask teens how they know they become adults, and they'll cite various responses, such as, "When I get my driver's license" or "When I have sex for the first time" or "When I graduate from high school." Ask parents, and the responses are just as mixed and usually fall along the lines of "When they're responsible for themselves."

This response from parents makes sense, really. Since adolescence was first identified in the early twentieth century, "being responsible for oneself" has been the working definition of the end of adolescence (and the beginning of adulthood).<sup>6</sup> Adolescence was originally considered an 18-month window of time, a bit of a culturally endorsed holding pattern in which "youth" were allowed an opportunity to wrestle with adolescent issues. At the time, these issues were called "storm and stress" and were a simplified version of the independence issues we might characterize today. Over the years, while using various terminologies, they've sifted down to

these three adolescent tasks: Identity (“Who am I?”), autonomy (“How am I unique, and what power do I have?”), and affinity (“Where and to whom do I belong?”).<sup>7</sup> The shift that’s taken place over the last hundred-plus years isn’t really in the *definition* of adolescence, however. It’s a shift in the *duration* of adolescence. And this has a direct impact, on many levels, on the existence and importance of middle school ministry.

I (Marko) was a middle schooler (then universally called “junior high school,” with a hat tip to a preparation for high school mindset) in the mid-1970s. My church hired its first youth pastor about the time I entered middle school, but he worked exclusively with the high school kids. We middle schoolers were still stuck in a wing of the Christian Education department. But by the time I was in high school, my church had hired a full-time junior high pastor. This was indicative of the lengthening of adolescence that was happening in culture at large.

By the time the 1970s had rolled around, adolescence was considered to be five years long (six school years)—from the commonly understood starting age of 13 to the normal graduation from high school age of 18. Let’s stop to think where these numbers came from, because they’ve been burned into our cultural consciousness for so many years.

Between the time when adolescence was first identified as an 18-month window, from 14.5 years old to 16, both the lower and upper ends of adolescence had expanded. Upper expansion was cultural, to be sure, but was directly tied to the normalization of high school education. In the earliest parts of the twentieth century, only a small percentage of older teenagers were in school. In fact, if older teens were in school at that point, most were already off to college; and this was primarily reserved for wealthier families.

High schools became more commonplace toward the end of the first half of the twentieth century, to the point that it was compulsory through 16 years old and often through 18 years old. By the time youth culture came into its own, in the 1950s,

high schools were the norm. High schools, of course, became the furnace of the new youth culture and quickly aided in raising the age at which adolescents were expected to be fully functioning contributors to society (the upper end of adolescence).

But the lower age also expanded. At the turn of the twentieth century, when adolescence was first talked about, the average age for the onset of puberty was 14.5 years old.<sup>8</sup> This became the *de facto* lower boundary for adolescence. But between 1900 and 1970, the average age for the onset of puberty dropped by about a year-and-a-half, to 13 years old.

But to say the expansion of the lower boundary of adolescence was purely physiological would be incomplete. As youth culture found anchoring and validation, preteens (who were 12 and 13 at the time, even 14) aspired to be a part of what was ahead of them. Soon enough preteens were considered young teens, both physiologically and culturally.

Now, this may not be a surprise to you, but things have changed dramatically since 1970. We could write a separate book about how the world has changed, how adolescence has changed, how education has changed, and how physiology has changed over the last four decades. We'll keep it short, but let's start with the older end of adolescence.

Since the 1970s, the expected age of integration into adult life has continued to grow older. There are economic reasons for this,<sup>9</sup> cultural reasons for this,<sup>10</sup> and physiological and psychological reasons for this (and probably others).<sup>11</sup> It's hard to nail down an exact age, as high school graduation provided us. But those who study it commonly understand adolescence to extend well into the mid-twenties now.

But this book isn't about older teenagers. So let's look at the lower boundary of adolescence.

The average age of puberty has continued to drop. These days, girls begin developing breast buds and pubic hair as early

as 9.5 or 10 years old, and they often experience menarche (their first period) around age 11 or 12. For our purposes, it's fair to say that puberty now begins around age 11.<sup>12</sup>

We'll talk about *why* this has happened a bit more in chapter 3. But for now, let's deal with this reality: Adolescence begins around 11 years old. And that's just physiologically. Culturally, young teens have become fully ensconced in youth culture at younger ages also, creating a calcifying edge to this new, younger definition of a teenager.

In fact, the lengthening of “teenage” to a 15-years-plus journey has caused many to start talking about the adolescent experience in three phases: Young teen, mid-teen, and older teen (or emerging adulthood).<sup>13</sup> Add to this the “youthification” of preteens (often called “tweens” by the media these days), and it would be fair to say the adolescent journey is closer to 20 years long—a full fourth of life. Now *that* should reshape our thinking about youth ministry in general, and ministry to young teens specifically.

## A Rare Opportunity

So what makes the years from 11 to 14 so unique? Why have we (Marko and Scott) continued to give our lives to this age group?

The two of us meet annually with a group of veteran middle school youth workers. When we first began meeting, back in 2002, we met to draft an open letter to the church about the importance of young teen ministry. Here's the content of that letter.<sup>14</sup>

“Anyone who works in the church knows that junior high may be the single most pivotal period for spiritual decisions in the lives of our children.” —*Rick Warren, senior pastor of Saddleback Church*

“Every church needs a strong Junior High ministry. It’s top priority. Can’t wait.”<sup>15</sup> —*Leith Anderson, president, National Association of Evangelicals; pastor, Wooddale Church, Edina, Minnesota*

Barna Research claims that the overwhelming majority of Christ-followers date their “conversion” prior to 13 years old;<sup>16</sup> indeed, after 13 years old the likelihood of conversion drops drastically.

This evangelistic openness is just one example of the responsiveness of children and young teens. Young teens experience change in every aspect of development: Physical, emotional, cognitive, relational, social, and—of course—spiritual. With their brand-new ability to think abstractly (a developmental “bonus” of puberty), Christian young teens, thanks to this God-ordained developmental phase, inevitably reexamine their childhood belief systems. This faith-evaluation is normal and good.

When we combine the “responsiveness” data presented by Barna (and confirmed by thousands of observations by the writers of this letter<sup>17</sup>) and the unique capacity for spiritual development among young teens, we see an extremely narrow opportunity for lifelong impact.

## RETURN ON INVESTMENT

Effective church ministry to young teens has a significantly high spiritual return on investment—much more so than in other age groups. It’s a “return” in many areas: Spiritual understanding, faith commitment, vocational calling, maturity, and leadership.

In addition, many churches are finding that middle school ministry affords a collateral benefit as an effective outreach vehicle to families. The president of a large Internet company, along with her husband, began attending a church in the Silicon Valley as a result of the transformation they observed in their junior high son through a church middle school ministry.

So what is the “investment”? Well, it’s all the stuff churches already allocate to other valued ministries: Prayer, focus, exposure,

facilities, finances, and—perhaps most powerful—people. Since effective ministry to young teens must be relational, quality adult staffing (paid and volunteer) is a vital factor in many ministries.

## HOW SHOULD I RESPOND?

We ask you to exercise your leadership potential to encourage a healthy young teen ministry in your church.

- If you are a senior pastor or a board member, consider hiring a full-time youth worker for young teens. Any church with 40 young teens, or the potential for that many, should have a full-time youth worker dedicated to young teens only (any church with a dozen or more young teens should have a distinct young teen ministry, separate from the older teens). Hire a professional, someone who feels specifically trained and called to work with young teens. Many churches make the mistake of hiring a low-wage intern—often just out of high school herself—to lead this critical age group.
- Churches should reexamine the old pattern of hiring a qualified, trained youth worker as a “student ministries pastor” who really works with high school students and for whom junior high ministry is a side project or afterthought.
- Encourage longevity in your paid and volunteer junior high ministry workers (and think long term yourself). Youth workers are often not in their prime until they’ve been at it a few years or more with young teens. They have much to learn about this age group in order to be truly effective—and there is no substitute for experience.
- Allocate funds for your young teen ministry: Funds for leadership training; funds for programming; funds for resources.
- Pray for your young teen ministry and especially for its leaders.

- Give them positive exposure. If you, as a leader in the church, talk positively about the young teen ministry, the church's perspective will begin to change for the better, and so will the health of the ministry. Check yourself against making sarcastic or joking comments (even well intentioned), like the pastor who habitually calls young teens "pre-people."

We firmly believe that your church will be a healthier, more effective ministry if you have a healthy young teen ministry. You will attract more families, raise future leaders, and connect with kids of an age that is possibly the most receptive to lifelong change and commitment to Christ.

That highly condensed argument kinda sums it up for us. The young teen years, when understood in the light of the physiological and cultural shift of adolescence and combined with the spiritual readiness of young teens (not just for conversion in the classic sense, but for conversion to living in the way of Jesus), are the crossroads of life. We're so passionate about this critical ministry, so excited about the potential for impact, and so giddy that you're interested enough in the lives of young teens to be reading this book. (Hold on, we need to take a few deep breaths.)

Okay. Let's move forward. Middle school ministry certainly is not baby-sitting.